South Haven Tribune

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January 25, 2026

SOUTH HAVEN SCHOOLS

Julie Newell / Tribune Editor

South Haven students showed their appreciation for the school board by making posters, cards and gifts.

SH school board, teachers union agree on contract

Students show their appreciation for board with gifts, posters

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor

SOUTH HAVEN — The South Haven school board approved a contract Wednesday with the teachers union to update the salary of educators in the district.

The contract is in the third year of a three-year agreement.

"Because that was a three-year contract and it had a reopener this year for financials, we met and negotiated this year," Chief Financial Officer Nancy Nelson said. "Now we'll have a new contract, so we'll start it over, but this new contract could even be a year, it might not necessarily be three years."

The salary increases in the contract will be covered by grant funds.

Other items

The board discussed upcoming trips for the robotics team and the high school band and orchestra.

The robotics team recently started their season and are preparing for competitions. Some of these competitions could be overnight trips, which need to be approved by the board.

The three upcoming trips for competitions include: March 21 in Battle Creek, April 15 to 18 at Saginaw Valley State University and April 28 in Houston, Texas.

Every four years the band goes on a large trip to Florida where they perform at Universal Studios twice. The last few years the orchestra has joined them on this trip.

The trip is planned for Feb, 11 through 14, 2027. They are in the planning stages still, but have many of the details worked out already.

Director of Bands Jeffery Bopp said the total cost is still unknown as they are still working out details for the trip. Students pay for the trip and is estimated to be $1,825 per traveler. This price will include, travel expenses, hotel and meals for the whole trip.

Bopp said they are planning to fly this year instead of taking a bus like they have in the past due to the increase of travel expenses and because it takes 24 hours to get there via a bus.

Another change is they will be going during the mid-winter break instead of spring break because of how busy and expensive it is to go to Florida during spring break.

The trips will be voted on in the February meeting.

Magnus Pearce from Maple Grove Elementary School was chosen for this month's student pride awards. The staff pride award was given to Ruby Vanden Berk, who is a paraprofessional and success coach at South Haven High School.

Pride awards are presented once a month during the school board meetings to at least one South Haven student and staff member. Pride awards are a tradition the school has done for more than 12 years to honor those who have shown excellence in academics and character.

It was board appreciation day and the board members were given gifts from each school. The students made posters, cards and other gifts to show their appreciation for the board.

Contact: jnewell@southhaventribune.com, 269-637-1104

SH City Council meetings canceled

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor

SOUTH HAVEN — Due to winter weather, the South Haven City Council special meeting and regular were canceled Monday night.

The special meeting was scheduled to take place at 5:30 p.m. to discuss the city council social contract, rules of procedure and schedule future work sessions.

The agenda for the regular city council meeting at 7 p.m. included considerations to approve two special events, one-year commercial use license agreements with four vendors and businesses, a donation for an acknowledgement sign for Avery Park and to authorize issuance of Downtown Development and Refunding Bonds.

As of Tuesday, there were no announcements made to reschedule the meetings.

Contact: jnewell@southhaventribune.com, 269-637-1104

SWMI projects caught up in fight over funds

Committee pulls money from Casco Twp. senior center

By LOUISE WREGE
Paxton Media Group

BENTON TOWNSHIP — Work to help young people get apprenticeships in Southwest Michigan through the Berrien Talent Collaborative is moving forward, even though $500,000 in state funding is in limbo.

"For us and for the collaborative, it is full speed ahead. We're not stopping. We're not slowing down," said Al Pscholka, vice president of enrollment, marketing and governmental relations at Lake Michigan College in Benton Township.

In the fall of 2024, the collaborative received $500,000 from the state to help kickstart the program, which is a partnership between LMC, Berrien RESA, Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber and Greater Niles Chamber of Commerce.

However, in December, the funding for the collaborative was among the $645 million in "work projects" that were clawed back by the Republican-led House Appropriations Committee using a seldom-used provision that allows either House or Senate appropriators to disapprove newly requested projects.

The funding was reinstated earlier this month after Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel ruled the move by the appropriations committee was unconstitutional because it allowed one committee to end funding that had been approved by the House, Senate and governor.

The House Republicans sued and on Friday, a judge issued a temporary

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LMC seeks nominations for alumni awards

By TRIBUNE STAFF

BENTON TOWNSHIP — Lake Michigan College is now accepting nominations for its 2026 Alumni Awards, honoring graduates who exemplify excellence in service, professional achievement and community impact.

According to a news release, the Alumni Association Board of Directors is encouraging colleagues and community members to recognize deserving alumni who have made a meaningful difference.

Nominations are due by June 15, 2026, with recipients to be announced this fall.

To be eligible, alumni must have graduated from LMC or its predecessor, Benton Harbor Community College, or taken at least 30 semester hours. LMC first presented its alumni awards in 1986. Since then, more than 80 individuals have been honored.

To nominate an individual for the 2026 LMC Alumni Awards, people can complete and submit the alumni award program nomination form at lakemichigancollege.edu/alumni-awards.

There are three categories for awards, which includes the Gladys Peeples-Burks Alumni Service Award, Clarence Beckwith Distinguished Alumni Award and Alumni Achievement.

The Gladys Peeples-Burks Alumni Service Award is named after Dr. Gladys Peeples-Burks, a member of the first graduating class of Benton Harbor Junior College and an advocate for the college and community. It is given to an alumnus who has offered significant personal or professional contributions to LMC or the community. The community is broadly interpreted as local, the state of Michigan, or the nation.

The Clarence Beckwith Distinguished Alumni Award was named in honor of the first LMC president and is given to an LMC alumnus who has accomplished significant success in their personal or professional endeavors.

The Alumni Achievement Award is presented to a recent alumnus who attended LMC within the past 15 years, demonstrated significant achievement, and distinguished themselves in their career, education or community.

Donations sought as Red Cross laments 'severe' blood shortage

By MAX REINHART
The Detroit News (TNS)

The Red Cross is appealing to past donors and potential new donors as it says a "severe blood shortage" could result in delays for surgeries and other medical procedures.

During a virtual news briefing Tuesday, officials said there was a 35 percent reduction in blood donations nationally in December. That equates to about 40,000 units of blood. More than 42,000 units are used by patients across the country every day, according to the Red Cross.

"The need for blood is constant," said Scot Dinsmor, blood account manager, American Red Cross Michigan Region. "In order to meet that need we need the generosity of donors."

Blood only has a shelf life of 42 days, so hospitals require constant replenishment. Officials said when hospitals are low on blood, it can result in surgeries being postponed.

"Sometimes what we can do depends on what we have to give patients," said Dr. Jensyn K. Cone Sullivan, a transfusion medicine and blood bank physician at Michigan Medicine. A steady supply "truly is the difference between life and death for many patients who visit our institution."

Sullivan said University Hospital in Ann Arbor requires around 60,000 "blood products" (which can include red blood cells, plasma and platelets) per year and needs about 200 products on hand each day to ensure it can meet

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The Tribune: Celebrating Our 127th Year

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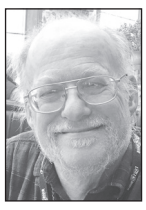
OBITUARY

Robert Olsen



Robert (Bob) Olsen was born Aug. 13, 1946, to Edwin W. and Frances J. Cooper at Kansas City, Mo. Following the family's return to Michigan Bob grew up on the shores of Lake Michigan in South Haven.

Graduating from L.C. Mohr High School in 1967, where Bob was affectionately known as "Bobo", Bob entered the University of Michigan where he was to meet fellow student and wife-to-be Susan D. Wolfe.

Bob and Sue married on June 14, 1970 and upon graduation from the University of Michigan, remained in Ann Arbor for a period of time entering the world of entrepreneurship operating a gift shop specializing in glassware and fine art items.

Eventually Bob and Sue decided to settle in Free Soil, Mich. where Sue grew up and moved into the home in which Sue grew up. While Sue was giving piano lessons and teaching French at a local community college, Bob started his paint contractor business, often helping those who struggled to pay for such work.

When Sue decided to enter the ministry and seek ordination by the United Methodist Church, Bob became her greatest supporter, assisting her in any way possible for Sue to achieve her dream. After serving many churches in rural Western Michigan, Sue passed away in June of 2015, and Bob returned to Free Soil.

Bob and Sue did not have children and Bob struggled to live independently following Sue's death and was a resident at Lake Michigan Senior Living, Ludington, Mich. at the time of his death.

Bob will be remembered for being the kind and gentle soul that he was, his love for all things University of Michigan, reading the printed word and dedication to his beloved wife Sue.

Bob was preceded in death by parents Edwin and Frances Olsen and wife Sue.

Bob is survived by his sister Judy K. Somers of Reno, Nevada, and brother Carl (Sue) Olsen of Bozeman, Montana.

The family would like to extend their appreciation to those many care workers who attended Bob in recent years with special thanks to Lena Bluestein and her staff at Blue Hat Ministries, Ludington, the staff at Lake Michigan Senior Living and Hospice of Ludington.

Per Bob's wishes he has been cremated and his ashes will be interred with those of wife Sue at Free Soil.

A celebration of life is being contemplated for sometime this summer.

Arrangements have been entrusted to Grace Funeral Home and Cremation Services, www.GraceCremations.com.

Homicide rate declines sharply in dozens of U.S. cities according to a new report

By CLAUDIA LAUER
Associated Press

Data collected from 35 American cities showed a 21 percent decrease in the homicide rate from 2024 to 2025, translating to about 922 fewer homicides last year, according to a new report from the independent Council on Criminal Justice.

The report, released on Thursday, tracked 13 crimes and recorded drops last year in 11 of those categories including carjackings, shoplifting, aggravated assaults and others. Drug crimes saw a small increase over last year and sexual assaults stayed even between 2024 and 2025, the study found.

Experts said cities and states beyond those surveyed showed similar declines in homicides and other crimes. But they said it's too early to tell what is prompting the change even as elected officials at all levels – both Democrats and Republicans – have been claiming credit.

Adam Gelb, president and CEO of the council – a nonpartisan think tank for criminal justice policy and research – said that after historic increases in violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, this year brought historic decreases. The study found some cities recorded decades-low numbers, with the overall homicide rate dropping to its lowest in decades.

"It's a dramatic drop to an absolutely astonishing level. As we celebrate it we also need to unpack and try to understand it," Gelb said. "There's never one reason crime goes up or down."

The council collects data from police departments and other law enforcement sources. Some of the report categories included data from as many as 35 cities, while others because of differences in definitions for specific crimes or tracking gaps, include fewer cities in their totals. Many of the property crimes in the report also declined, including a 27 percent drop in vehicle thefts and 10 percent drop in shoplifting among the reporting cities.

The council's report showed a decrease in the homicide rate in 31 of 35 cities including a 40 percent decrease or more in Denver, Omaha, Nebraska, and Washington. The only city included that reported a double-digit increase was Little Rock, Arkansas, where the rate increased by 16 percent from 2024.

Gelb said the broad crime rate decreases have made some criminologists question historic understandings of what drives trends in violent crime and how to battle it.

"We want to believe that local factors really matter for crime numbers, that it is fundamentally a neighborhood problem with neighborhood level solutions," he said. "We're now seeing that broad, very broad social, cultural and economic forces at the national level can assert huge influence on what happens at the local level."

Republicans, many of whom called the decrease in violent crime in many cities in 2024 unreliable, have rushed to say that tough-on-crime stances like deploying the National Guard to cities like New Orleans and the nation's capital, coupled with immigration operation surges, have all played a role in this year's drops.

However, cities that saw no surges of either troops or federal agents saw similar historic drops in violent and other crimes, according to the Council's annual report.

Democratic mayors are also touting their policies as playing roles in the 2025 decreases.

Jens Ludwig, a public policy professor and the Director of the University of Chicago Crime Lab, stressed that many factors can contribute to a reduction in crime, whether that's increased spending on law enforcement or increased spending on education to improve graduation rates.

"The fact that in any individual city, we are seeing crime drop across so many neighborhoods and in so many categories, means it can't be any particular pet project in a neighborhood enacted by a mayor," Ludwig said. And because the decrease is happening in multiple cities, "it's not like any individual mayor is a genius in figuring this out."

He said while often nobody knows what drives big swings in crime numbers, the decrease could be in part due to the continued normalization after big spikes in crime for several years during the pandemic. A hypothesis that stresses the declines might not last.

"If you look at violent crime rates in the U.S., it is much more volatile year to year than the poverty rate, or the unemployment rate; It is one of those big social indicators that just swings around a lot year to year," Ludwig said. "Regardless of credit for these declines, I think it's too soon for anybody on either side of this to declare mission accomplished."

SHORTAGE

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patients' needs. Currently, she said, the hospital is treating a young person who requires upwards of 100 blood products a day due to a severe hemorrhage.

The Red Cross is attributing the shortfall to two main factors: extreme cold and widespread cases of influenza.

Dinsmore said inclement weather last month led to the cancelation of 400 Red Cross blood drives across the U.S., including 12 in Michigan. He also believes that the "worst flu season in nearly 20 years might be sidelining donors."

He said "immediate action" is needed to ensure that health care facilities have ample supply for patients who need it for issues like trauma, surgeries, childbirth and diseases.

Jennifer Douglas of Howell knows first-hand how important it is for hospitals to have a readily available supply.

In 2011, she had back-to-back unrelated medical incidents that required her to receive a total of 38 units of blood, plus 31 units of plasma and platelets. She said the transfusions saved not just her life, but that of her then-unborn son.

"I would not be alive today if that blood was not already waiting for me," she said. Now, she and her family "live our lives every day with overwhelming gratitude to blood donors."

Brittany Murray / Press-Telegram / TNS

The American Red Cross and Discovery partnered for a Shark Week-themed blood donation at Cabrillo Marine Aquarium in San Pedro, California, on July 18, 2022. Cathy Weaver came to donate in honor of her father who always impressed upon her to donate blood, on what would have been his 100th birthday.

Douglas now co-hosts two blood drives each year to show her gratitude and to help make sure others who face similar emergencies have access to blood.

"If you've never donated before I want you to know that you could be someone's hero," she said.

Dinsmor said on Jan. 5 the organization announced it was "teetering" on a shortage. Donors at that time "stepped up and answered the call."

But with numbers falling again, Red Cross workers have been contacting past donors and urging them to make plans to give again.

The shortage is most pressing for blood types O, A-negative and B-negative, he said.

Dr. Lance Wells, emergency medicine physician at Hillsdale Hospital said it was "absolutely imperative" that Michiganians give blood.

"There's an expectation that if you need blood and you come to the hospital, come to the emergency department, that we can give you blood," Wells said.

Donating blood generally takes about an hour and the actual withdrawal process usually takes no more than 10 minutes, officials said. Drives are regularly held at schools, places of worship and the Red Cross' nine donation centers across the state.

In Michigan, people as young as 16 can donate blood with parental consent.

Potential donors can find blood drives or donation centers by calling 1-800-RED-CROSS, visiting redcrossblood.org or downloading the Blood Donor American Red Cross app.

Anyone who gives blood by Jan. 25 will be automatically entered in a contest to win a trip for two to Super Bowl LX, Feb. 8 in Santa Clara, California.

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restraining order on the expenditure of the funds.

Pscholka said the collaborative has used about $125,000 of the money so far.

"For me, this should really not be a partisan issue. This is about getting jobs for young people in our community, and I don't think that's a partisan issue," Pscholka said. "We'll wait to see what the courts have to say, but we're not stopping and we're not slowing down."

He said he understands what the appropriations committee did because during his time as a state representative from 2010-16, he was chair of the committee for the last two years.

"As I understood it when I was chair, you had the power to do something like that. However, how would you ever negotiate another budget if you did something like that?" Pscholka said. "That if you break the trust, it would be extremely difficult to do another budget. And that's where I think they're going to find themselves."

He said LMC has been doing apprenticeships since the 1940s for college students and the collaborative adds an apprenticeship program for high school students in 11th and 12th grades.

Pscholka said he's uncertain if the collaborative will have to pay back the money it has already received and used if the courts rule in the Republican's favor.

Other projects cut

The Berrien Talent Collaborative isn't the only project in Southwest Michigan that was cut by the House Appropriations Committee.

State Rep. Joey Andrews, D-St. Joseph, told Benton Harbor city commissioners Tuesday that the revitalization of the former State Street Theater in Benton Harbor has had its funding clawed back.

Richard Hensel, president of the Benton Harbor Downtown Development Authority, said after the meeting they were slated to receive $30,000 from the Michigan Economic Development Corp. to pay Wightman in Benton Township to draw up plans for the theater building.

He said they received the first payment of $7,500 early last year.

"We were pretty much done with the work last July and submitted a report and everything and they didn't pay," he said. "We were waiting for the check, thinking it would come any day."

Hensel said the DDA signed an agreement with the state for the money and another agreement with Wightman for the work to be done.

"Then this craziness happened with part of the legislature deciding to take all that money out of projects that were already contracted for and underway," he said. "It's basically theft. They broke a contract."

Andrews said other projects in his district that had their funding clawed back were for a city hall project in Bridgman, a senior center in Casco Township and a small business incubator in South Haven.

He said they have already built the senior center in Casco Township "and then suddenly found out the state wasn't going to reimburse them for it."

Andrews said much of the money for the projects was spent, but not reimbursed by the state yet.

"It's really a pretty fundamental breach, I think, to promise somebody something, watch them spend the money and then say 'no,'" he said.

He said the grants under dispute are what they call legislative enhancement grants, which are requests legislators make individually for their districts.

Andrews said it will likely take several months for this case to be resolved in the courts because whoever loses will probably appeal.

"I expect this to end up in front of the Supreme Court at some point. I'll say we are pretty confident that we're going to prevail in front of the Supreme Court," Andrews said. "It's just a matter of how long it takes for us to get to the Supreme Court. So just expect updates from our office as we go and we learn new things."

The case is currently in the Michigan Court of Claims.

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Photos by Don Campbell / Paxton Media Group

Nathaniel and Carole Hayes sing as gospel artist David Brock performs during a Martin Luther King Jr. Community Breakfast held Monday at the Mendel Center's Grand Upton Hall at Lake Michigan College.

Picking up the baton

Dr. King's legacy honored and revisited at community breakfast

By LOUISE WREGE
Paxton Media Group

The All God's Children Community Choir performs during the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Breakfast held Monday at the Mendel Center's Grand Upton Hall at Lake Michigan College.

James Gunter, executive director of Present Pillars, gives the keynote address during the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Breakfast held Monday at the Mendel Center's Grand Upton Hall at Lake Michigan College. "When urgency fades, preparation fades. When preparation fades, the exchange gets dropped," Gunter said.

BENTON TOWNSHIP — Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed of a world where people will "not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

Speakers at Lake Michigan College's annual Martin Luther King Jr. Community Breakfast on Monday said that while there has been progress, they have not yet reached the finish line.

James Gunter, the keynote speaker and executive director of Present Pillars, said they are running a relay, not a marathon, and it's important to make sure those coming behind them are ready to take control of the baton.

"The relay teaches us responsibility because some of us are still running on roads made by people we'll never meet. And some of us are being watched by the people who will not run," Gunter said. "... This isn't just about how far you can go. It's about whether the race survives after you."

He said King understood he may not live to see his dream come true.

"He said, 'I may not get there with you,'" Gunter said. "He was acknowledging the truth about leadership and progress. That the work outlives him."

However, Gunter said King's legacy has been celebrated without commitment and his message lost some of its urgency when people started acting like the work was finished.

"When urgency fades, preparation fades. When preparation fades, the exchange gets dropped," he said. "Let me be clear. This is not political. This is revolutionary. Revolutionary is not a party label. It's a posture."

He said it's the way to challenge what is normal as unjust.

Benton Harbor Mayor Marcus Muhammad said he's saddened and joyful at the same time "because there is a concerted effort to erase and sanitize and homogenize the great work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr."

"I read a report out of the Oval Office that the Civil Rights Movement was a detriment and was like kryptonite – and that's my terminology – to white men. And I believe that there's an effort to undo and unravel the great work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr."

Muhammad said King was disturbed by the militarization of America.

"In 1776, the country was established fighting a king. You cannot have a king and democracy simultaneously," Muhammad said. "So if we see kings rising up in this country, then as patriots, what is our duty? And I commit to you, I certainly am no Minuteman, but I am prepared to defend as I'm under oath to the Constitution of the United States against foreign as well as domestic enemies."

St. Joseph Mayor Brook Thomas said the Twin Cities and Berrien County have a long history of battling racism and discrimination.

"While we can't erase our past, we can do everything in our power now to make sure that we continue to head in the right direction toward unity, justice and equality," Thomas said.

She said the unveiling in 2024 of the two monuments depicting MLK – one in St. Joseph and one in Benton Harbor – was a proud moment for her.

"While we can be proud of the accomplishments that we've made over the years to overcome some of the challenges in our communities, it's important to remember our history and know that there's always something else, always something that we can do to bridge the gap between our communities," she said.

Gianna McClellan, a junior at St. Joseph High School, said when she was asked to speak at the breakfast, she didn't know what she wanted to say. Then she talked to her grandfather, Moses McClellan.

"He began to talk about how he grew up," McClellan said. "Unlike him, I'm able to drink out of any water fountain I choose. Unlike him, I can go to any school that I choose. And unlike him, I'm able to pursue any job I put my mind to."

She said there's a big difference between reading about history in textbooks and hearing about it from a person you look up to.

"Honestly, it made me think of how grateful I am here doing what I am allowed to do now," she said. "I started to understand how blind I was to everything around me. How if I had grown up during that time, I probably wouldn't be here right now. I probably wouldn't have the friends I have. I probably would not have the education I have. And I probably wouldn't have the family I have."

McClellan said she is thankful to everyone who came together and participated in the peaceful protests back then so she can have the freedoms she has today.

She said King encouraged people to continue standing when others wanted to put them down.

"We're still fighting to complete his dream," she said. "So now it's our turn."

McClellan said there's still a lot of hatred going on in the world.

"Maybe this will inspire you to take some action," she said. "... Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

The annual MLK Community Breakfast was held in the Grand Upton Hall at Lake Michigan College Mendel Center in Benton Township, sponsored by Corewell Health.

Musical performances were provided by all God's Children Choir, the LMC Choir and David Brock, a gospel artist from Benton Harbor.

The Spirit of MLK Spotlight individual award was given to Carlisle Sutton, a sponsored research officer at Andrews University in Berrien Springs.

The Spirit of MLK Spotlight student award was given to Quincy Sulton, who graduated in 2025 with a degree in psychology from Western Michigan University.

The Spirit of MLK Spotlight organization award was given to First Tee of Benton Harbor.

South Haven Speaker Series to launch 12th season

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The South Haven Speakers Series recently announced that it will launch its 12th season this spring.

According to a news release, the series will feature four programs addressing major issues that shape both the world and the community.

Board president Elaine Stephens said in the release that this season's topics and speakers were selected by the Speakers Series Board with input from past audiences.

"The topics reflect issues that are crucial to what we face around the world and at our doorstep," Stephens said. "It will be another exciting year for those attending our series and for those watching repeat broadcasts from our website and on YouTube."

The series opens on April 30 with Ambassador Bridget Brink, an American diplomat and west Michigan native who served as U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine for four years, including during the Russian invasion in 2022.

She previously served as U.S. Ambassador to Slovakia and has held positions in the State Department since 1996.

Her experience includes serving as Deputy Director of Southern European Affairs where she coordinated U.S. foreign policy to advance U.S. interests with Turkey, Greece, Cyprus, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia.

Ambassador Brink's central question of her talk is "Why Ukraine and Eastern Europe Matter?"

The second program will take place on May 14 and feature Annie Blackwell, an astronomer at the University of Michigan.

Blackwell's program will address "How Bright Lights Endanger Starry Nights" as she describes the growing challenge of light pollution and efforts to reduce it.

"Research shows that light pollution is costly, disturbing wildlife and harming human health," the release stated.

Board member and author Michael McCarthy said in the release that brightened skies are depriving people of the stellar spectacle that has inspired humanity for ages.

"During the day South Haven offers wonderful lake views and sunsets," McCarthy said in the release. "It is possible we could provide an after-dark experience of breathtaking brilliant skies."

The fall series opens on Oct. 22 with Dr. Tom Ludwig, professor of psychology at Hope College.

He will speak on the promises and perils of artificial intelligence, noting that one Microsoft CEO predicts that technological change over the next several years will reshape most jobs across nearly every industry.

Dr. Ludwig will address the questions "Will AI change what it means to be a person? Are we ready to have cheerleaders and crowds root for robot basketball teams?"

The series concludes on Nov. 19 with journalist and author Tim Alberta, who has covered the national political scene for years.

His presentation follows shortly after the midterm elections. Alberta has written for The Hotline, The Wall Street Journal, National Journal, National Review, Politico and currently The Atlantic.

Alberta will discuss broader cultural trends, including polarization, extremism and the roots of unrest in American society – all of this informed by his reporting from across the country and his particular insights.

Alberta will address the question "How do we cope without being sucked into the quicksand of extremism and conflict?"

"With his unique insights and point of view, along with his deeply personal faith as well as a subtle sense of humor, he will explain what we need to do to successfully survive in our difficult times," the release stated.

All presentations are held at Lake Michigan College – South Haven Campus. Refreshments are available at 6:30 p.m. and all programs start at 7 p.m.

All programs are recorded for later viewing on the Speakers Series website and YouTube channel.

The South Haven Speakers Series is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization.

For more information, go to southhavenspeakerseries.org.

Michigan LDS church attacker called in bomb threats before rampage, 911 call shows

By MAX BRYAN
The Detroit News (TNS)

DETROIT — The gunman who attacked a Church of Latter-day Saints in Grand Blanc Township in September tried to divert law enforcement away from his target beforehand, a newly released 911 call shows.

Thomas "Jake" Sanford on the morning of Sept. 28, 2025, drove his truck into the church on McCandlish Road and opened fire on the congregation, according to police. Four people were killed, and the building was destroyed in a fire.

At 10:21 a.m. that day – about four minutes before the attack – Sanford called 911 and said there were bomb threats at three religious congregations in the region. Grand Blanc Township Police Chief William Renye identified the caller as Sanford. He listed Holy Family Catholic Church in Grand Blanc and River Church in Goodrich. He also said there was a bomb at a Mormon temple in Birmingham.

When the dispatcher tried to talk to Sanford on the call, he interrupted her.

"No, no, no, no, no, listen to me – listen. I'm going to talk, and you're going to listen, and I'm going to hang up the phone," Sanford said.

ABC News first reported on the contents of the call.

Renye called Sanford's call "a ploy to divert law enforcement resources" away from the location of the attack.

The Grand Blanc Township police chief said Sanford's call did not hinder their response to the attack, however.

"Those threats, they were not in the Grand Blanc Township jurisdiction, so that did not hinder our response," Renye said.

Renye also said the dispatch staff was able to confirm the threats were bogus, but did not disclose how they did so.

Sanford's attack on the church was a "targeted act of violence believed to be motivated by the assailant's anti-religious beliefs against the Mormon religious community," according to a video statement from the FBI's Detroit office in late October. Multiple witnesses said Sanford returned to Michigan from his time in Utah, which has a significant Mormon population, with vitriol for the religion.

Consumer spending pushes U.S. economy up 4.4 percent in third quarter

By PAUL WISEMAN
AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON — Powered by strong consumer spending, the U.S. economy grew at the fastest pace in two years from July through September, the government said Thursday in a slight upgrade of its first estimate.

America's gross domestic product – the nation's output of goods and services – rose at a 4.4 percent annual pace in the third quarter, the Commerce Department reported Thursday, up from 3.8 percent in the April-June quarter and from the 4.3 percent growth the department initially estimated. The economy hasn't grown faster since third-quarter 2023.

Consumer spending, which accounts for 70 percent of U.S. GDP, grew at a healthy 3.5 percent pace. Spending on services such as healthcare rose 3.6 percent versus a 3 percent uptick on goods spending, including an increase of just 1.6 percent on so-called durable goods such as cars that are meant to last at least three years. A surge in exports and a drop in imports also contributed to robust third-quarter growth.

Business investment (excluding homebuilding) rose at a 3.2 percent clip, partly reflecting bets on artificial intelligence.

The economy has remained resilient despite uncertainty caused by President Donald Trump's economic policies, particularly his double-digit taxes on imports from almost every country on Earth.

Despite the strong growth numbers, many Americans are dissatisfied with the state of the economy and especially the high cost of living.

The gap between how consumers say they feel and the strong spending numbers might reflect what is known as a "K-shaped economy." Wealthier Americans are spending more, their incomes boosted by market gains and growing investments, while lower-income households struggle with stagnant pay and high prices.

U.S. applications for jobless benefits inch up last week

By MATT OTT
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans who applied for unemployment benefits inched up last week but U.S. layoffs remain historically low despite signs of a softening labor market.

U.S. filings for jobless aid for the week ending Jan. 17 rose by 1,000 to 200,000, up from 199,000 the previous week, the Labor Department reported Thursday. That's fewer than the 207,000 new applications that analysts surveyed by the data firm FactSet were expecting.

Applications for unemployment benefits are viewed as a proxy for layoffs and are close to a real-time indicator of the health of the job market.

Earlier this month, the government reported that hiring remained sluggish in December, capping a year of weak employment gains that have frustrated job seekers even though layoffs and unemployment remained low.

Employers added just 50,000 jobs last month, nearly unchanged from a downwardly revised figure of 56,000 in November, the Labor Department said. The unemployment rate slipped to 4.4 percent, its first decline since June, from 4.5 percent in November, a figure also revised lower.

The Labor Department also recently reported that businesses posted far fewer jobs in November than the previous month, a sign that employers aren't yet ramping up hiring even as growth has picked up.

Businesses and government agencies posted 7.1 million open jobs at the end of November, down from 7.4 million in October. Layoffs also dropped as companies seem to be retaining workers even as they are reluctant to add staff, a trend economists refer to as "low hire, low fire."

Recent government data has revealed a labor market in which hiring has clearly lost momentum, hobbled by uncertainty raised by President Donald Trump's tariffs and the lingering effects of the high interest rates the Fed engineered in 2022 and 2023 to rein in a spike of pandemic-induced inflation.

E. Jason Wambsgans / Chicago Tribune / TNS

The Brandon Road Lock and Dam on Dec. 5, 2023, on the Des Plaines River in Joliet, Illinois, the site of the Brandon Road Interbasin Project to combat the movement of invasive carp and other nuisance species into the Great Lakes.

Construction of the Asian carp barrier in Illinois hits another snag

By MELISSA NANN BURKE
The Detroit News (TNS)

WASHINGTON — Nine months ago, President Donald Trump signed a presidential memorandum instructing his administration to "achieve maximum speed and efficiency" in moving to block invasive Asian carp from reaching the Great Lakes.

But the key project in Illinois to erect barriers that would prevent the fish from infiltrating Lake Michigan has since been paused and remains under administrative review by the Trump administration, according to lawmakers in Michigan and Illinois.

The Democratic senators from both states wrote to the White House budget director and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, urging them to end the pause, review, and release the federal funds that Congress already approved to allow the project to proceed.

They expressed concern that continued delay could soon affect the next round of contract awards and cause the long-delayed project's cost to spike after more than a decade of study, engineering work and planning.

"The federal investment currently is on hold without justification, and additional contracts for the project cannot be awarded due to the funding pause," the senators wrote.

"The current pause and review could increase the cost and slow the final completion date of (the project), increasing the likelihood that invasive carp could enter the Great Lakes. If invasive carp were to become established in the Great Lakes, they would outcompete existing fish populations, permanently damage ecosystems, and significantly impair the $7 billion Great Lakes economy."

The senators who signed the Jan. 15 letter are Michigan Sens. Gary Peters of Bloomfield Township, Elissa Slotkin of Holly and Illinois Sens. Dick Durbin and Tammy Duckworth, though the project has historically had bipartisan support.

Neither the White House nor the Army Corps responded to questions Tuesday about the administrative pause and halt in spending on the carp project, including when it was put in place.

The episode is just the latest holdup for the $1.15 billion project at the Brandon Road Lock & Dam in Joliet, Illinois, that Congress authorized in 2020 after a decades-long effort by the Corps, scientists and state officials to address the invasive carp. The fish are currently held in check by electrical barriers downriver that are considered unreliable.

Michigan and Illinois officials had reached an agreement in 2024 with the Army Corps to move forward on construction of the project at Brandon Road. The agreement allows for $274 million in federal funding and $114 million in state funding to be used for the construction of the first of three phases of the project. Almost all of the federal appropriation comes from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law signed under former President Joe Biden.

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer last year raised the Asian carp issue during face-to-face meetings with Trump and he brought it up in remarks in the Oval Office in April, calling the carp a "powerful" fish.

"We're also working on a certain fish that's taken over a beautiful lake called Michigan, right? And that's a tough one," Trump said at the time. "They jump out of the water. They jump at the fishermen. I mean, I've never seen anything like it."

At the time, Trump said he had spoken with the Army Corps and noted they have a "pretty gruesome method" for blocking the fish, even if it's "expensive."

"It's sort of a bipartisan thing. When you get it right down there, it's a very expensive thing," Trump said. "I said, 'Well, but we have to save Lake Michigan.' Because these fish – they eat everything in the way, including the other fish. They eat everything."

The next month, Trump issued a memorandum explicitly expressing support for what's known as the Brandon Road project and directed federal agency heads to streamline any permitting and environmental reviews or approvals for the project "as quickly as possible."

Trump also demanded at the time that Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker, a Democrat, drop his hold on the project's starting construction over funding tensions, which seemed to have been resolved after the president's memorandum.

Months later, in August, however, Trump suggested he'd withhold funding for Brandon Road because Pritzker hadn't made the same request for help on the issue that Whitmer did, the Chicago Tribune reported. "I think until I get that request from that guy, I'm not going to do anything about it," he said.

The project near Joliet is the result of over 10 years of study and planning by the Army Corps to prevent Asian carp from traveling beyond the Brandon Road lock and dam, which is 286 miles above the confluence of the Illinois and Mississippi rivers.

The location is considered a choke point in the fight against invasive species reaching Great Lakes waterways, where scientists say the fish would pose a significant threat to the region's native species and aquatic ecosystems.

The Brandon Road plans involve building a series of mechanisms to block carp from traveling from the Mississippi River watershed to Lake Michigan, including an electric barrier; underwater sounds and an air bubble "curtain" that deters fish; a barge clearing device that makes sure fish don't sneak through; pesticides; upstream fishing; and other methods. It is expected to take six to eight years to complete.

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0900 LEGALS

Meeting Synopsis
Casco Township Board Meeting
Tuesday, January 20th, 7:00 PM
CALL TO ORDER: Clevenger called the meeting to order at 7:00 pm and led in the Pledge of Allegiance.
PRESENT: Clevenger, Ridley, Campbell & Fleming.
ABSENT: Overhiser
ITEMS APPROVED: Edgewater Grant Proposal for Casco Nature Preserve
Road Millage Resolution
Granicus Contract Renewal
2026 Poverty Guidelines
Board of Review Alternative Stare Date Resolution
Hall Builders Change Orders
South Haven Schools Tax Resolution
2026 Dust Control Proposal
ADJOURNMENT: 8:45 PM
Allan Overhiser, Casco Supervisor
Rachel Ridley, Casco Clerk

SOUTH HAVEN CHARTER TOWNSHIP SYNOPSIS
REGULAR MEETING JANUARY 14, 2026
PRESENT: Poole, Bertorelli, Wiatrowski, Fisher, Lewandowski, and Stein
ABSENT: DeGrandchamp
Motion to approve December 10, 2025 Regular Meeting Minutes.
Capt. Brian Montgomery gave a report for SHAES. **Chief Adam DeBoer** gave a report for SHPD, and Gail Gladney reported for Van Buren County Commission.
Motion to approve the Agenda.
Supervisor Stein reported that the Senior Housing plan did not get approved by MSHDA. Diane Rigozzi was in attendance to request support from the township to help obtain RFPs for the project. Supervisor Stein also reported that he and the Zoning Administrator will be meeting with Habitat for Humanity this week.
Motion to approve Resolution 26-01 to Rezone/PUD Lighthouse Apartments.
Motion to approve Resolution 26-02 to approve Poverty Exemptions.
Motion to approve Resolution 26-03 Budget Amendment Resolution.
Motion to accept the Planning Commissions recommendation for a Special Land Use on 8th Avenue.
Reports were received. W.C.Askew from the Road Commission was in attendance and Jean Stein reported for the Library. Diane Rigozzi reported for Senior Services.
Motion to approve payment of bills in the amount of $55,328.53
Meeting was adjourned at 8:38 p.m.
Respectfully submitted, Brenda Bertorelli, Clerk

Michigan Flywheelers Museum awarded a $100,000 grant

By TRIBUNE STAFF

Photo provided

When completed, the Black River Railroad will feature the historic Hanson Express #902 engine and the 15 inch track will extend around the museum property.

SOUTH HAVEN — The Michigan Flywheelers Museum recently announced it has been awarded a $100,000 Challenge Grant dedicated to the construction of a brand-new ticket booth and gift shop.

According to a news release, this project marks the first phase of a new entrance designed to enhance the visitor experience.

"The proposed facility will serve as a modern front door to the museum's 80-acre campus," the release stated. "Designed to blend historical charm with contemporary convenience."

The new barn-style structure will include:

■ Improved Admission Area: A dedicated area for guests to comfortably purchase tickets for museum events like the Antique Engine and Tractor Show that is held in September.

■ Modern Amenities: Large, accessible, and modern restroom facilities to accommodate the museum's growing number of annual visitors.

■ Expanded Gift Shop: A significantly larger retail space featuring unique Flywheelers logo items, tractor-themed home decor and old fashion toys.

As a Challenge Grant, every dollar donated by the community and supporters will be matched, up to $100,000. This provides a unique opportunity for donors to see their contributions work twice as hard toward preserving Michigan's agricultural heritage.

"This grant is a monumental stepping stone for the Flywheelers," President of the Michigan Flywheelers Museum Patrick Ingalls said in the release. "As we continue to grow, our goal is to provide a first-class experience for our guests from the moment they pull onto the grounds. This new entrance isn't just a building; it's an investment in the future of our museum."

The new entrance and building is part of the Black River Railroad project. For the last three years, museum volunteers have been laying a 15 inch track around the property for a Grand Scale steam train that, when finished, visitors will be able to ride on.

"The museum is asking local businesses, historical enthusiasts, and the South Haven community to help meet the $100,000 goal," the release stated.

Contributions can be made online via the museum's website through Zeffy, by mail or attending one of the many fundraisers planned. All donations towards the Challenge Grant are tax-deductible.

Located east of South Haven, the Michigan Flywheelers Museum is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of antique gas and steam engines, tractors and farm machinery. With a recreated "Olde Town," working sawmill and educational exhibits, the museum offers a hands-on look at the evolution of Michigan's machinery and agricultural life.

For more information, go to www.michiganflywheelers.org, email michiganflywheelers@yahoo.com or call 269-639-2010.

Van Buren County Road Commission promotes winter safety

By TRIBUNE STAFF

LAWRENCE — During the winter months, the Van Buren County Road Commission carries out many responsibilities – but none are more visible, or more critical, than snow and ice control.

According to a news release, the road commission wants to bring awareness to the dangerous conditions that residents and snow plow divers face in the winter.

"Snow plowing is also among the road commission's dangerous jobs due to limited visibility, challenging weather conditions and heavy traffic," the release stated. "That's why we're asking residents – especially parents, children and newly licensed drivers – to help us keep everyone safe this winter."

Tips on how to keep plows and people safe include:

■ Stay off snowbanks along roadways. Please do not build snow forts, make tunnels, or play on snowbanks near roads. Plows cannot see children hidden in the snow.

■ Keep a safe distance from the road. Stand well back from the edge of the roadway while waiting for the school bus, getting the mail, or watching plow trucks at work.

■ Avoid driveways when plows are approaching. Stay clear of the end of the driveway – plows may throw snow or shift unexpectedly.

■ Keep toys and sleds out of the roadway. Toys left near the road can slide into traffic or become dangerous obstacles.

■ Place garbage cans well up the driveway on snowy collection days. This helps prevent damage to cans and keeps plow routes clear.

Tips for drivers include:

■ Turn on your headlights, override the automatic light control in your vehicle and clean off your vehicle before driving. It prevents visibility obstruction for you (from snow sliding onto the windshield) and hazards for others (flying ice chunks causing crashes, damaging other cars, or blinding other drivers).

■ Buckle up and allow extra travel time in winter conditions.

■ Never attempt to pass a snowplow while it is plowing.

■ Do not travel beside a plow – drivers have limited visibility, especially to the rear. And plow trucks can suddenly move sideways when hitting drifting or packed snow.

■ Most importantly: Stay 200 feet back from the snowplow – it's the law. For a point of reference, 200 feet is roughly comparable to 13 car lengths. The law also requires drivers to stop at least 20' away from a snowplow stopped at an intersection.

"Keeping our roads safe is a shared responsibility," the release stated. "By working together and watching out for one another, we can help protect our children, our drivers and the road crews who work tirelessly to keep Van Buren County moving all winter long."

Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer says U.S. is 'ready for a woman president'

By CRAIG MAUGER
The Detroit News (TNS)

LANSING — Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer says she believes the U.S. is ready to have a female president, pushing back on doubt cast by former first lady Michelle Obama.

Whitmer, a Democrat whom some see as a potential candidate for president in 2028, was asked by National Public Radio's Steve Inskeep last week about comments Obama made in November, when she said, in part, the country has "a lot of growing up to do."

"I love Michelle Obama, so the last thing I want to do is disagree with her," Whitmer said in response to Inskeep's question. "But, you know, I think America is ready for a woman president."

Michigan's governor added, "The question comes down to a choice between two people."

Inskeep posted on social media Tuesday a 30-minute video recording of his interview with Whitmer, which took place Thursday at the Detroit Auto Show.

Whitmer noted that despite Democrat Kamala Harris' loss to Republican Donald Trump in 2024, female candidates won multiple statewide races in both 2024 and 2025. She mentioned Michigan's new U.S. Sen. Elissa Slotkin, new Virginia Gov. Abigail Spanberger and new New Jersey Gov. Mikie Sherrill.

"We saw women win up and down the ballot in hard, important states to win," Whitmer said.

"For whatever reason, we have not had a woman president yet," Whitmer added. "I think we will at some point in the near future."

Gender was not the reason that Harris lost to Trump, Whitmer said, contending that a lot of different factors had come into play in the 2024 presidential election after incumbent Democratic President Joe Biden dropped out of the race in mid-July.

In November 2025, Michelle Obama said the 2024 election showed the country wasn't ready for a female president, according to NBC News.

"That's why I'm like, don't even look at me about running, because you all are lying," Obama said. "You're not ready for a woman. You are not."

Whitmer's interview with NPR touched on an array of other issues, including the economy and her concerns about Trump's administration interfering in upcoming elections.

Asked why Trump had targeted other Democratic-led states, like Minnesota and California, but not Michigan, Whitmer said her team was still "on high alert."

"Our approach in Michigan is to try to keep the temperature down, to keep open lines of communication, and that's what we're going continue to do," Whitmer said. "And hopefully, we'll continue to be successful."

During much of 2025, Whitmer tried to maintain a positive relationship with Trump. During an event in April, Trump said Whitmer had done a "a very good job" while announcing Selfridge Air National Guard Base in Macomb County would receive a new squadron of fighter jets.

On whether the Trump administration will allow free and fair elections going forward, Whitmer told Inskeep she's working to ensure Michigan is ready.

"I am concerned about it," Whitmer said. "I would be lying if I said I wasn't."

Whitmer, a former state lawmaker, is currently the vice chairwoman of the Democratic Governors Association, which works to elect Democrats to governor positions across the country.

She can't run for reelection in 2026 because of term limits. She won races for governor in Michigan in 2018 and 2022 by about 10 percentage points.

Harris lost to Trump in Michigan in 2024 by about 2 percentage points, 48%-50 percent.

Allegan County residents warned about a fake IRS letter scam

By TRIBUNE STAFF

ALLEGAN — Allegan County Clerk and Register of Deeds Bob Genetski recently announced a warning to the county residents to be cautious regarding letters that claim to be from the Internal Revenue Service.

According to a news release, the letters purport to be from the Internal Revenue Service claiming a federal tax lien has been placed in the recipient's name.

The letters entitled "IRS debt notification" look official but is a scam to steal peoples' personal information.

"Congressman Bill Huizenga's Office reached out to the IRS and confirmed that the letter is a fake," Genetski said in the release.

The clerk-register was alerted to the scam when numerous worried constituents began calling the Register of Deeds Office to confirm whether or not a lien had been placed on their property.

"Do not respond to this letter or any similar scam by giving up personal information over the phone," Genetski said in the release. "That is what they are after."

County officials encourage those who receive such a letter or similar suspicious mail to call the Register of Deeds Office at 269-673-0390 or review their land records on the county's online searchable database at www.allegancounty.org/departments/register-of-deeds to see if any liens have been place on one's property.

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www.ourtownplayers.org

South Haven foundation accepting grant applications

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — South Haven Area Community Foundation recently began accepting Tier One and Tier Two grant applications for the 2026 grant award cycle

According to a news release, area 501(c)(3) nonprofits, school systems or municipal governments can submit applications for grant funds towards programs or projects that positively impact the greater South Haven area primarily through education, arts, culture and economic development.

Tier One will accommodate grantees seeking up to $1,000 for general operating expenses and project costs. Tier Two will accommodate grantees seeking $1,001 up to $10,000 for project costs only.

Applicants will be asked to select a tier upon applying and will be limited to one application per grant cycle.

"The foundation seeks forward thinking projects that respond to local needs, strengthen quality of life and bring partners together to create lasting community impact," the release stated. "To date, it has awarded over $1 million to local organizations."

Grants are funded through donations to the community foundation endowment. In addition to providing annual grant support, the foundation oversees and grows endowment funds on behalf of local nonprofits and scholarship initiatives.

The South Haven Area Community Foundation serves communities that are economically, educationally and socially connected to South Haven and the surrounding areas. Currently included are the municipalities of Casco, Lee and Pullman in Allegan County; South Haven, Geneva, Columbia, Covert, Bangor and Arlington in Van Buren County.

The deadline to submit is March 15. Grant awardees will be notified in May.

Those interested in starting an endowment fund or making donations to the existing funds can contact the South Haven Area Community Foundation at info@southhavencf.org.

Applications and grant details are available online at www.southhavencf.org/grants.

For more information about the South Haven Area Community Foundation, go to www.southhavencf.org or call 269-815-4223.

SOUTH HAVEN COMMUNITY CALENDAR

Photo provided / Tom Renner

South Haven heavyweight Tyler Morehouse controlling his Coloma opponent enroute to scoring a first period pin during Wednesday's meet.

Ongoing events

Visually impaired and blind persons support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of the month at 1 p.m. at Senior Services of Van Buren County.

Dementia and Alzheimer's caregivers support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of each month at 6 p.m. at Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church library.

Three Blondes Brewing: Trivia night on Thursdays at 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. and Sundays at 1 p.m. and 2 p.m.

Sparkle and Spice Boutique: Mom and Me play date. Fridays from 9-10 a.m.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for adults from 6-8 p.m. on the first and third Wednesday of the month. Artists of any level can bring their own projects to work on. Basic art supplies will be available. Attendees must be 18 years old and over. Members are free, non-members cost $5.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for ages 9 to 13 from 4-5:30 p.m. every Wednesday. Young artists are invited to create art at their own pace with an instructor to help guide as needed. Free workshop but a $10 donation is suggested to help cover cost of supplies.

Candlelight Yoga: Thursdays at 7:30 p.m. at the Church of Epiphany. Cost is $15.

Food pantry: First Congregational Church open from 10 a.m. to noon on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. It is a drive-up food pantry.

Food pantry: Sacred Heart Catholic Church. For Bangor residents only. Open from 1 to 4 p.m. on Thursdays.

Food, clothing, baby pantry: Lily of the Valley Church in Covert. Open from noon to 2 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Personal care and clothing pantry: First Assembly of God open from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Peace Lutheran Church open from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Simpson United Methodist Church in Bangor. Open from 10 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays. Must call the central office to register.

South Haven Memorial Library: Story Time on 11 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays through May 26, 2026.

HawksHead: Pasta on the Patio every Wednesday at 5 p.m.

Michigan Maritime Museum: Hands-on the Harbor every Thursday at 10:30 a.m.

Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum: "Over and Under the Snow" by Kate Messner and Christopher Silas Neal StoryWalk available from Jan. 1 to Feb. 28. Call to schedule an appointment.

Lakeside Social Bowling Alley: Glow Bowl every Friday from noon to 9 p.m.

Bridge: Chicago Scoring at 1 p.m. on Tuesdays at Lakeside Social, 9921 Blue Star Memorial Highway, South Haven.

Bridge: Duplicate Scoring at 1 p.m. on Wednesdays at Lakeside Social, 9921 Blue Star Memorial Highway, South Haven.

Michigan Maritime Museum: free admission on the first Sunday of every month from November through April.

First United Methodist Church: Free meals every Tuesday night. Doors open at 5:30 p.m. Meal is served at 6 p.m.

January

26 – Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for grades 6 to 12 from 3 to 5 p.m.

27 – Rotary Club: Morning meeting. Mike Sawyer to present on the Van Buren County Senior Services Ramp program.

27 – Wrestling: Boys and girls varsity wrestling at 6 p.m.

28 – South Haven Memorial Library: Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

28 – Basketball: Girls middle school basketball against Black River Public School at 4 p.m.

28 – Basketball: Girls freshman basketball against Zeeland West High School at 4 p.m.

28 – Basketball: Girls junior varsity basketball against Zeeland West High School at 5:30 p.m.

28 – Basketball: Girls varsity basketball against Zeeland West High School at 7 p.m.

28 – Bowling: Boys and girls bowling against Martin Public School at 4 p.m.

29 – Basketball: Girls middle school basketball against Lakeshore High School at 5:30 p.m. All-area tournament.

30 – Basketball: Girls varsity basketball against Coloma High School: 6 p.m.

30 – Basketball: Boys varsity basketball against Coloma High School: 7:30 p.m.

30 – South Haven Memorial Library: Parent Cafes from 11 a.m. to noon. Snacks and engaging conversation about self-care, support and community resources. Free event. Kids can enjoy Stuffed Animal Story Time with the library staff during the event.

30-31 – Ice Breaker Festival

31 – South Haven Memorial Library: Once upon a winter event with games and activities from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

February

1 – Ice Breaker Festival

3 – Scott Club: A Century of Black History Commemorations at 1 p.m. at the First Congregational Church at 651 Phoenix Street.

6 – South Haven Memorial Library: Play-Dough Play Date at 11 a.m. free event for preschoolers.

11 – South Haven Memorial Library: Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

17 – Scott Club: A Quilting Journey at 1 p.m. at the First Congregational Church at 651 Phoenix Street.

21 – Al-Van Humane Society: Fur Ball 2026: Breakfast at Tiffany's fundraiser event at the Black River Barn.

25 – South Haven Memorial Library: Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

27 – South Haven Memorial Library: Parent Cafes from 11 a.m. to noon. Snacks and engaging conversation about self-care, support and community resources. Free event. Kids can enjoy Stuffed Animal Story Time with the library staff during the event.

28 – South Haven Memorial Library: Astronomy Club at 11 a.m.

Al-Van Humane Society
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73303 8th Ave. PO Box 421 South Haven, MI 49090
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Meet our Pet of the Week, Dobby the House Elf!

At just 6 months old, Dobby is the sweetest little pup you'll ever meet. Like her namesake, she may be a bit shy at first and is still learning that humans are kind but give her a little time and she warms up quickly with gentle affection and puppy kisses.

Dobby came to Al-Van as a stray at only 4 months old, and she's been discovering the magic of being safe and loved ever since. One thing she's absolutely mastered. Chasing tennis balls like it's her favorite spell. Playtime brings out her happy, playful side and helps her confidence shine.

With patience, love, and a cozy home of her own, Dobby is ready to be someone's loyal companion. All she's missing now is her forever family. No sock required.

Apply to adopt at al-van.org/adopt

Fur Ball 2026

Fur Ball 2026 is almost here. Join Al-Van Humane Society on February 21st for Breakfast at Tiffany's, a glamorous evening inspired by Audrey Hepburn herself. Enjoy dinner, a cash bar, live and silent auctions, and a high-energy dueling piano show, all in support of homeless pets. Tickets are limited, so don't wait. Get yours now at al-van.org/furball and be part of one of the most anticipated nights of the season.

THIS WEEK'S WISH LIST
Purina dry dog food

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FOCUS

Jolearra Tshiteya / NASA

NASA's Nancy Grace Roman Space Telescope is now fully assembled. Its 300-megapixel camera can capture regions of sky about 100 times larger than the Hubble Space Telescope's field of view. The mission is slated to launch by May 2027, but the team is on track for launch as early as fall 2026.

From a new flagship space telescope to lunar exploration, global cooperation – *and competition* – will make 2026 an exciting year for space

By GRANT TREMBLAY
Smithsonian Institution (The Conversation)

In 2026, astronauts will travel around the Moon for the first time since the Apollo era, powerful new space telescopes will prepare to survey billions of galaxies, and multiple nations will launch missions aimed at finding habitable worlds, water on the Moon and clues to how our solar system formed.

Together, these launches will mark a turning point in how humanity studies the universe – and how nations cooperate and compete beyond Earth. Coming from one of the world's largest astrophysical research institutes, I can tell you, the anticipation across the global space science community is electric.

Mapping the cosmos at unprecedented scales

Several of the most ambitious missions slated for launch in 2026 share a common goal: to map the universe on the largest possible scales and reveal how planets, galaxies and the largest cosmic structures evolved over billions of years.

The centerpiece of this effort is NASA's Nancy Grace Roman Space Telescope. Construction was completed on the Roman telescope in December at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, and if all goes well, it could launch as early as fall 2026.

What makes Roman more special than NASA's other flagship space telescopes is not just what it will see, but how much of the sky it can see at once. Its 300-megapixel camera can capture regions of sky about 100 times larger than the Hubble Space Telescope's field of view while maintaining comparable sharpness – like switching from studying individual tiles to surveying the entire mosaic at once.

During its five-year primary mission, Roman is expected to discover more than 100,000 distant exoplanets, map billions of galaxies strewn across cosmic time and help scientists probe dark matter and dark energy – the invisible scaffolding and mysterious forces that together account for 95 percent of the cosmos.

Roman also carries a coronagraph, a pathfinder instrument that can block out a star's blinding light to directly photograph planets orbiting around it. The technology could pave the way for future missions, like NASA's planned Habitable Worlds Observatory, capable of searching for signs of life on Earth-like worlds.

Over in Europe, the European Space Agency's PLATO mission, short for PLAnetary Transits and Oscillations of stars mission, is scheduled to launch in December 2026 aboard Europe's new Ariane 6 rocket. PLATO will monitor about 200,000 stars using an array of 26 cameras, searching for small, rocky planets in their stars' habitable zones, while also determining the stars' ages.

For China, 2026 is expected to mark a milestone of a different kind: the launch of its first large flagship space telescope dedicated to astrophysics. The Xuntian space telescope, also known as the Chinese space station telescope, is currently expected to launch in late 2026. Xuntian will survey enormous regions of the sky with image quality comparable to Hubble's, but with a field of view more than 300 times larger.

Like NASA's Roman Space Telescope, Xuntian is designed to tackle some of modern cosmology's biggest questions. It will hunt for dark matter and dark energy, survey billions of galaxies and trace how cosmic structure evolved over time. Uniquely, Xuntian will co-orbit with China's Tiangong space station, allowing astronauts to service and upgrade it and, potentially, extending its life for decades.

Together with the new Vera C. Rubin Observatory on the ground, which will repeatedly scan the entire southern sky to capture how the universe changes over time, the Roman, PLATO and Xuntian space telescopes will study the cosmos not just as it is but as it evolves.

Global milestones in human spaceflight

While robotic observatories quietly expand our view of the cosmos, 2026 will also mark a major step forward for human spaceflight.

NASA's Artemis II mission, now readying for launch as early as April 2026, will send four astronauts on a 10-day journey around the Moon and back. It will be the first time humans have traveled beyond low Earth orbit since Apollo 17 in December 1972.

Across the globe, India is preparing to reach a similarly historic milestone. Through its Gaganyaan program, the Indian Space Research Organisation is planning a series of uncrewed test flights in 2026 as it works toward sending astronauts to space. If that happens, India would become only the fourth nation to achieve human spaceflight on its own – a significant technological and symbolic achievement.

Meanwhile, China will continue regular crewed flights to its Tiangong space station in 2026, part of a broader effort to build the experience, infrastructure and technologies needed for its planned human missions to the Moon later in the decade.

In parallel, NASA is relying increasingly on commercial spacecraft to carry astronauts to and from the International Space Station, freeing the agency to focus its own human spaceflight efforts on deep-space missions beyond Earth.

Together, Artemis II, Gaganyaan and China's ongoing crewed space station missions reflect a renewed global push toward human exploration beyond Earth orbit – one in which governments and commercial partners alike are laying the groundwork for longer missions and a sustained human presence in space.

The origin and geology of the Moon and Mars

Another set of 2026 missions focuses on a more grounded question: how rocky worlds – and the resources they contain – came to be.

Japan's Martian Moons eXploration mission, slated to launch in late 2026, will travel to Mars, spend three years studying both of its small, potato-shaped moons – Phobos and Deimos – and collect a surface sample from Phobos to bring back to Earth by 2031.

Scientists still debate whether these moons originated as captured asteroids or debris from an ancient giant impact with Mars. Returning pristine material from Phobos could finally settle that question and reshape our understanding of how the inner solar system evolved.

China's Chang'e 7 mission, expected to launch in mid-2026, will head to the Moon's south pole, a region of intense scientific and strategic interest. The mission includes an orbiter, lander, rover and a small flying "hopper" designed to leap into permanently shadowed craters, where sunlight never reaches. These craters are thought to harbor water ice, a resource that could one day support astronauts or be converted into rocket fuel for deeper-space missions.

The Chinese and Japanese missions both highlight how planetary science and exploration are becoming increasingly intertwined, as understanding the geology of nearby worlds also informs future human activity.

It's the Sun's solar system, we're just living in it

In 2025, powerful solar storms forced airlines to reroute and ground flights, disrupted radio communications and pushed vivid auroras far beyond their usual polar haunts – lighting up skies as far south as Florida. These events are reminders that space is not a distant abstraction: Activity on the Sun can have immediate consequences here on Earth.

Not all of 2026's major missions look outward into deep space. Some are focused on understanding the dynamic space environment that surrounds our own planet.

In a notable example of international cooperation, the solar wind magnetosphere ionosphere link explorer, SMILE – a joint mission between the European Space Agency and the Chinese Academy of Sciences – is scheduled for launch in spring 2026.

SMILE will provide the first global images of how Earth's magnetic field responds to the constant stream of charged particles flowing from the Sun. That interaction drives space weather, including solar storms that can disrupt satellites, navigation systems, power grids and communications.

Understanding those interactions is critical not only for protecting modern infrastructure on Earth but also for safeguarding astronauts and spacecraft operating beyond the planet's protective magnetic shield.

At a time of growing geopolitical tension in space, the mission also stands out as a rare and consequential example of sustained scientific cooperation between Europe and China.

The global stakes

These missions unfold against a complex geopolitical backdrop. The United States and China are both racing to return humans to the Moon by the end of the decade.

Yet for all the competition, space science remains profoundly collaborative. Japan's Martian Moons eXploration mission carries instruments from NASA, ESA and France. International teams share data, expertise and the sheer wonder of discovery. The universe, after all, belongs to no one nation.

Having spent my career studying the universe, I see 2026 as a year that reflects both the rivalries and the shared ambitions of space exploration today. Competition is real, but so is cooperation at a scale that would have been hard to imagine a generation ago. From the search for habitable worlds around distant stars to plans for returning humans to the Moon, the work is global – and the sky is shared by all.

Grant Tremblay is a federal astrophysicist and external relations lead at the Smithsonian Institution's Astrophysical Observatory. The Conversation is an independent and nonprofit source of news, analysis and commentary from academic experts. This article is republished under a Creative Commons license. Read the original article at https://theconversation.com.

FOCUS

New Year's resolutions usually fall by the wayside, but there is a better approach to making *real changes*

By MICHELE PATTERSON FORD
Lecturer in Psychology, Dickinson College
(The Conversation)

THE CONVERSATION

How are your New Year's resolutions going? If you've given up on them, you're not alone.

Every January, people across the world seek a fresh start and set goals for the year to improve their health and quality of life. Dry January and new gym memberships accompany a desire to shake off the stress and holiday pounds.

But research shows that resolutions typically don't last. As a practicing psychologist and professor of counseling psychology, I have seen many people start off the new year with lofty self-improvement goals, only to become frustrated and give up early into the new year.

This happens so frequently that popular media has even coined the name "Quitter's Day" for the second Friday in January –when most people have given up on their resolutions.

However, there is a way to continue your self-improvement goals and find success by making changes that offer incremental rewards instead of frustration. My students and clients are consistently surprised by how small actions and practices bring about big rewards. Below are a few manageable and meaningful practices to adopt that can last well after the new year's motivation fades.

Why don't resolutions work?

Most New Year's resolutions tend to be restrictive or rely on willpower, such as eliminating alcohol and sugar from your diet, or exercising every morning.

The problem is that these types of commitments force us to do something we don't really want to do. And success takes time: It can take more than six weeks before improvements from exercise become apparent.

It comes as no surprise, then, that these goals are often short-lived and unsuccessful in the long term – it is hard to be successful when we are battling ourselves to do things that don't come naturally, without immediate rewards. In reality, people prefer immediate gratification and simultaneously tend to downplay the benefit of waiting for longer-term rewards.

Be kind – to yourself

We are often much nicer to our friends, and even to strangers, than we are to ourselves.

Kristin Neff, a psychologist and leader in self-compassion research, teaches that by mindfully quieting our inner critic and being as compassionate to ourselves as we would be to a friend, we can significantly improve our well-being.

Research shows that people who practice being their own partner or teammate – rather than an opponent – feel happier and more confident. The rewards from this type of self-compassion can be seen and felt faster than the results of diet and exercise, and can help us make better choices in multiple aspects of our daily lives.

In my personal and professional life, I have seen people succeed most often when they change how they relate to themselves. In other words, instead of being intensely critical of our emotions and what we are thinking, we are able to be gentler with our experience and be more accepting of our own thoughts and feelings. When we receive these emotional rewards, we feel relief and happiness – payoffs that make it far easier to enthusiastically repeat the pattern.

Engaging in this kind of self-compassion also allows us to better cope with stress and our emotions.

Small shifts in gratitude and outward kindness go a long way

Another evidence-based way to improve overall well-being is to focus on the what's going well for you and what you are grateful for – in the moment, or more broadly, in your life.

Instead of focusing on whether you succeeded on your initial resolutions, try journaling three good things at the end of each day. In doing so, focus less on the big successes – though they count, too – and instead on the small moments you enjoyed, such as the hug from a friend, the quiet moment with coffee or the smile from a stranger.

Practice random acts of kindness to boost mood and well-being. Reach out to a friend you haven't talked to in a while or buy coffee for a stranger in the coffee shop. These activities provide an emotional boost that can last for hours, if not days.

Making these small shifts can help stave off the stress and guilt that can thwart your self-improvement goals.

Mindful eating

The well-known practice of mindfulness encourages paying attention – without judgment – to the present moment.

Research shows that taking time to slow down and savor the moment has substantial physical and psychological benefits, such as lowering stress and improving focus, among others. In fact, mindfulness even has the power to change brain connections, leading to greater control over our emotions.

This approach can also be applied to mealtime and diet, a popular focus of New Year's resolutions. Using the practice of mindfulness can also help us shift from a judgmental and restrictive view of food to a focus on enjoyment and savoring.

So instead of eliminating certain foods or thinking of foods as either good or bad, slow down and savor your food. This can look like taking a moment to take in what your food looks and smells like, and chewing your food slowly, noticing the taste and texture – like a wine-tasting experience but with your meal.

My clients often tell me how eating more mindfully helped change their relationship with food. One client said that instead of thinking about how much she was eating, she instead experienced how much she liked the taste of her meal and the sense of fullness when she felt she had eaten enough.

So perhaps this year, instead of focusing on willpower or restriction, choose connection with yourself and others instead.

Doing so will improve your happiness and your overall well-being, long after the New Year's resolutions fade.

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Photos by E. Jason Wambsgans / Chicago Tribune / TNS

Rabia Amin, right, an attorney, and Nooraan Amin, a mathematics and architecture student, on Jan. 8 at Best Sub #2, a long-standing shop in Humboldt Park, Illinois, owned by their father, Asif Amin Cheema, who was deported to Pakistan after being detained by Border Patrol agents in September.

Illinois family piecing life and restaurant back together after father deported

By ZAREEN SYED
Chicago Tribune (TNS)

A friend, left, comforts the wife of Asif Amin Cheema, the owner for over 20 years of Best Sub #2 in the Humboldt Park, Ill., on Jan. 8. He was was deported to Pakistan on Jan. 1 after being detained by Border Patrol agents in September.

CHICAGO — In Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood on the city's West Side, a sandwich shop on North Avenue stands as it has for more than 20 years – menu prices taped over and over again on the wall, a door that squeaks and sticks in its groove, a bulletproof service window separating servers slinging Philly subs with a pile of fries and a crisp, cold orange soda. But now, without its beloved owner, an undertone of lifelessness lingers.

Asif Amin Cheema, owner of Best Sub #2, was deported to Pakistan on the first day of the new year, leaving behind a beloved customer base and a business he had started from scratch in 2003.

Nooraan Amin, Cheema's 19-year-old son, was behind the counter last Thursday afternoon, filling shifts in between college classes and another part-time job. Cheema has been away from the shop for more than three months since Border Patrol agents arrested him in September. Nooraan said it feels like years have passed.

"When my dad was here, he really only taught me cashier duties, which was just staying in the front, but he was slowly getting me into how the cooking process works," Nooraan said. "But now, I have to help with everything, including stocking and inventory."

Nooraan's mother, whose name the Tribune is keeping private, came by the restaurant with her daughter. She would often stop by to spend time with her husband as he whipped up a sandwich or put on the kettle for chai.

"It used to be a time where we could spend alone, he loves to cook for me here," she told the Tribune in Urdu. She cupped Nooraan's chin and asked him if he ate.

They're a tight-knit family, grappling with a new normal. Best Sub #2 is the family's primary source of income, but it's also Cheema's legacy, Nooraan said. They'll never get rid of it.

Cheema's wife recalled how he manually placed each tile in a checkerboard pattern on the restaurant's floor. She smile as she pointed out how some blue tiles are mistakenly touching each other. He also built the blue and yellow booths with help from a few handymen, she said.

Rabia Amin, Cheema's 27-year-old daughter, looked up at the fading pictures of the menu items, now comically indiscernible. She said she took most of those pictures when she was in sixth grade. Her dad had plans to upgrade the menu boards to replace the hand-scribbled pricing, with many 2s turned to 3s thanks to inflation.

Rabia, a writing and research clerk for a law firm overseeing family and criminal defense cases, has been vocal about her father's arrest. She helped her family make several last-ditch efforts to halt Cheema's removal, a process that started on Sept. 17 when Border Patrol agents arrested him.

A few weeks into Operation Midway Blitz, Cheema was driving across the street from La Huerta, the Mexican grocer on Lake Street in his hometown of Addison, when two Border Patrol cars started flashing their high beams at him. He pulled over, then two more cars arrived and blocked him in, Rabia explained.

"Obviously, he has never been arrested before, so he just complied," she said. "And I found out because that morning on Facebook, I saw that ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) was in Addison, specifically in that same intersection as La Huerta. I was like, that is so strange. And I don't know how to describe it, but I just felt like something was wrong … so I checked his location, and saw he was in Broadview. That's when I put the pieces together."

Cheema was deported due to a 1991 removal order, but he had learned of its existence only last April, when he went in for a green card interview.

Cheema's attorney, William McLean, said the situation is complicated. McLean recently came on as his legal counsel, while Cheema was being held at the Broadview ICE processing facility. McLean said ICE identified Cheema through fingerprints and biometric information he had provided when applying for his green card.

"Your biometrics is a 360-degree photo of your head, so when ICE invades Chicago a year later with their facial recognition technology, they see you in your car, and they know exactly who you are and your entire immigration history," McLean said. "And that's what happened to him. They identified him and arrested him with no warrant."

Rabia suggested that had her father not tried to secure a legal pathway, the removal order wouldn't have even been flagged for immigration officers, as it hadn't yet been enforced.

"That's the problem – people are trying to go about it the right way and still suffer consequences. And they let him go home after the interview, after seeing a removal order. They didn't deport him then," she said. "Doesn't that make you wonder?"

Rabia said her dad wondered if he had reason to worry as word spread in early September of immigration enforcement across Chicagoland.

"Things like this, you just don't think it's going to happen to you. And the government kept saying, 'We're only getting the worst of the worst, we're only getting criminals who are illegal,'" Rabia said. "I was like, 'Well, Dad, you had your green card interview this year, you have a valid work permit. You are not a criminal. You're not the worst of the worst.'"

After Cheema's arrest, the family's attorney at the time filed a motion to reopen the removal order case with the Board of Immigration Appeals, the first movement on that order in 30 years. If the motion had been approved, Cheema would have been able to stay in the country temporarily.

But court records show every attempt the Amin family made to halt his deportation was denied.

A week before his scheduled deportation, McLean filed an emergency temporary motion seeking a restraining order on his removal. This led to a hearing on Jan. 1, just hours before Cheema's scheduled flight to Pakistan. An emergency judge in the Northern District of Illinois decided not to grant a temporary restraining order. McLean said the judge was reasonable and gracious, but it was a gut punch to the family.

That same day, before the hearing, Cheema collapsed while at O'Hare International Airport. He was taken to Resurrection Hospital for evaluation but was sent back to the airport after three hours. Rabia said they presented Cheema's hospital discharge papers to the 7th District Court of Appeals judge, hoping the court would weigh in favor of keeping an unwell Cheema at home with his family. Rabia said her father has a history of ill health, having previously suffered two heart attacks.

With the TRO denied, Cheema would be on the next flight to Pakistan. Rabia said her mom and her siblings raced to the airport on the off chance that they'd get to see him before takeoff, and at the very least, to hand off some of his personal belongings and extra medications to an immigration officer. They weren't able to see him. But an officer did eventually grab his stuff, Rabia said.

"What's crazier is that because my dad's not a criminal, he's not dangerous, they put him on a commercial Qatar Airways flight back to Pakistan," she said. "He was at the gate, waiting in public – so he's obviously safe enough to sit with all these random people while he's waiting for his gate to open, but his own family can't even say bye to him? It's just cruel."

A week after Cheema's deportation, the restaurant wasn't busy, but the few customers who stopped by shared well-wishes and prayers for the family.

Sales have dropped since the COVID-19 pandemic, when the restaurant could no longer stay open 24 hours a day. Then last year, Best Sub #2, like many other restaurants in heavily Latino areas, faced a new reality with fewer customers dining in and workers afraid as intense immigration enforcement rippled across the Chicago area.

In December, the immigration crackdown briefly went to Charlotte, North Carolina, and then moved to New Orleans, before returning to Chicago. Most recently, the Department of Homeland Security announced it was sending more than 2,000 federal agents and officers to Minnesota, following a fatal shooting of a woman by an immigration officer.

Rabia said that up until his arrest, Cheema would often be the one to lock up each night, even though he employed four full-time workers and a store manager. His regulars knew he'd always be around.

"We'd come in here, late at night and just sit down if we had nowhere else to go – he'd let us get warm, never kicked us out," said Lawrence Davis, a longtime customer who has known Cheema for 20 years.

Davis is a member of the Alliance of Local Service Organizations, whose mission is to prevent the transmission of violence locally. He and his colleague, William Estrada, were in the area passing out flyers about their outreach efforts, when they saw Cheema's wife sitting in a booth near the window.

"We grew up in the neighborhood. … He's a great man, a great man. If you were ever short or didn't have anything, he'll still give (food) to you," Estrada said. "It's terrible. … A nonviolent person. They started using that excuse about violence. (Cheema) is furthest from being a criminal. He's an outstanding businessman in the community."

Other customers stopped by for lunch and lingered a little longer after ordering gyro sandwiches and chicken fingers.

Rabia said a lot of locals developed a safe space with her father. Over the years, many in the Desi community who had precarious legal status but families to feed and provide for turned to Cheema for a small job around the restaurant. Cheema's wife said even college students who came from India or Pakistan with little or no work experience often found themselves working a few hours at Best Sub #2, just enough to make some pocket money.

"He'd try his best to find something for someone to do, if they needed a job," Rabia added. "He gave money, food, … his time. He gave so much, and now I think the community can give back to him."

Rabia and her older sister started a GoFundMe campaign to help them navigate recent financial strains, including costly legal fees. The funds will go toward Cheema's essential living expenses and medical needs. Rabia's eldest brother, who is 29, is special needs and depends on his father for financial and emotional stability, and the funds will also help with his care.

The family video calls Cheema every day. Rabia's sister flew out to Pakistan last week with a suitcase full of items from home. Currently, Cheema is staying with a relative but the family is hoping to set up a more comfortable living arrangement if they're able to afford it.

The goal ultimately is to bring him back, Rabia said.

McLean said that while it is difficult to return to the United States after deportation and not a realistic pathway for most people, some can successfully return after several years. In Cheema's case, his children could petition for him to immigrate to the country.

The day Cheema was deported, McLean filed a Bivens action – which seeks damages against federal officers for violating constitutional rights while acting under federal authority – against local and national leaders and "multiple unknown ICE agents." The action alleges that Cheems was denied his due process rights.

The suit also alleges that agents withheld medication from him for at least three days before his deportation, which led to his collapsing at the airport. McClean sued the director of ICE's field office in Chicago, Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem and Attorney General Pam Bondi for personal injury damages for $250,000.

McLean said officials also violated the Geneva Convention Against Torture by subjecting Cheema to "no less than three mock deportations" where law enforcement informed him of impending removal and transferred him to O'Hare and back.

Those appeals remain pending.

In an email to the Tribune, the Department of Homeland Security said any allegations that Cheema was denied medication are false.

"At the airport on Dec. 17, when officers attempted to board him for his flight, he claimed chest pains. Out of an abundance of caution, Cheema was immediately transported by ambulance to a hospital, where he was medically cleared within hours. Conveniently, during this brief hospital stay, a stay of removal was filed, but rejected by the 7th Circuit Court of Appeals," the Department of Homeland Security said.

In a brief phone call with Rabia, Cheema told the Tribune that he has every intention of returning to his wife and children, as well as to his employees and customers.

"We have no intention of selling the shop," Rabia said. "That's my dad's blood, sweat and tears. … The reason why my dad was able to pay for my law degree and my other siblings' education; all our living expenses, our cars, our house. It's 30 years of his life."

Rabia said her father was orphaned at a young age and came to America to give his family a more secure future.

"How could you fault someone for wanting better?"

FOCUS

Raccoons break into liquor stores, scale skyscrapers and pick locks – studying their clever brains can clarify human intelligence, too

By KELLY LAMBERT
Professor of Behavioral Neuroscience,
University of Richmond (The Conversation)

THE CONVERSATION

When a curious raccoon broke into an Ashland, Virginia, liquor store in December 2025, sampled the stock and passed out on the bathroom floor, the story went viral within minutes. The local animal shelter's Facebook post was picked up by national and international outlets and quickly inspired raccoon-themed cocktails, "trashed panda" merchandise and even a cameo on "Saturday Night Live."

For me, the story hit close to home. The store that hosted this inebriated bandit sits just blocks from the small behavioral neuroscience laboratory where I began investigating raccoon brains about 15 years ago. Although the so-called drunken raccoon made questionable decisions after breaking into the liquor store, the species – Procyon lotor – is known for its impressive intelligence, curiosity and problem-solving skills.

Despite being one of the most intriguing mammals living alongside humans, raccoons have avoided the scientific spotlight. Why aren't more neuroscientists and psychologists studying raccoons? What have researchers missed about the mammalian brain by focusing on rodents instead?

Why raccoons aren't lab staples

In the U.S., it is estimated that laboratories use more than 100 million rodents, including mice and rats, each year. Rodents are ideal for research because they reproduce easily and adapt well to confinement. Scientists have tailored extensive research tools to study them. Long before rats dominated psychology labs, raccoons were actually a leading candidate for animal models of problem-solving and intelligence.

That ended when scientists realized they'd met their cognitive match. In one study, researchers reported that all raccoon participants escaped through the laboratory ventilation system.

Unsurprisingly, scientists promptly shifted to rodents. Practicality – not scientific suitability – ultimately crowned the rat as king of the laboratory. I have studied rats for decades, and I can confirm that none have ever disappeared into the ceiling.

Neither pet nor pest

Humans have an ambivalent relationship with raccoons. They appear too wild to be domesticated, too endearing to be treated purely as pests and to be considered exotic life. Even President Calvin Coolidge, who famously received a raccoon intended for the dinner table from a supporter in Mississippi, ended up keeping it as a beloved White House pet.

And the role confusion continues today with glimpses of humanlike behaviors in raccoons as they enter our living spaces. One report described raccoons interacting with playground equipment at a child care center on Canada's west coast in ways similar to human children, and even breaking into classrooms as if they were auditing the morning lesson.

Inspired by Montessori education principles, I visited a raccoon rehabilitation center in Saskatoon, Canada, called Bandit Ranch Rehab a few years ago. After introducing young raccoons to slinkies, puzzles and blocks, I sat in awe as they interacted with these objects with the focused enthusiasm of preschoolers on a mission.

This interspecies confusion seems to be mutual. Recent evidence suggests that urban raccoons are becoming increasingly tolerant of humans, especially when it suits them. But they are quick to leave when curiosity or opportunity calls.

Raccoon imagination

The drunken Ashland raccoon captured global attention because it fit the narrative people have projected onto the species: mischievous, opportunistic, clever and more than a little humanlike. But their sophisticated brains and mental capacities, aligning more with primates than other mammals, are even more intriguing.

Early behavioral research suggested that raccoons can learn a task, walk away and later return to solve it accurately – as if having mentally rehearsed the solution. In contrast, other species, including dogs and rats, needed to maintain continuous focus. Scientists have speculated that raccoons have mental imagery capabilities similar to humans.

When a rogue raccoon scaled a 25-story skyscraper in Minneapolis several years ago, I couldn't help but wonder what that animal was anticipating at the top. Do raccoons form internal representations of future outcomes? And if so, how much agency and foresight do they bring to their decisions?

To answer these questions, I have collaborated with wildlife biologists, veterinarians and neuroscientists around the country to study what may be one of the most underestimated and understudied brains in the animal kingdom.

What's going on inside the raccoon brain?

Working with neuroscientist Suzana Herculano-Houzel, my laboratory at the University of Richmond has found that raccoons pack an astonishing number of neurons – an amount comparable to primates – into their brains. Scaled up to size, a raccoon brain would contain roughly the same number of neurons as a human brain.

We also found that raccoons possess specialized fast-conducting brain cells known as von Economo neurons, which are also found in humans, other great apes and a few additional large-brained mammals. In apes, these neurons appear in both the insula – a part of the brain important for processing internal body states – and the anterior cingulate, which plays a key role in emotional regulation. In raccoons, these neurons are present only in the insula and not in the anterior cingulate.

This neural arrangement may help explain the species' striking combination of clever problem-solving and rapid decision-making during exploration – frequently leading to risky behaviors that can have unfortunate consequences. These findings raise the possibility that raccoon neuroscience could offer useful insights into the neural foundations of impulse control and distracted attention.

In collaboration with ecologist Sara Benson-Abram's research team, we also found that raccoons with more sophisticated cognitive abilities had more neural cells in the hippocampus, reinforcing the idea that their learning and memory capacities map onto similar brain systems as those in people. Taxi drivers in London, who frequently use their knowledge of the 25,000 streets in London, also have a larger hippocampal area.

In addition to their impressive brains, raccoons' dexterous hands play a key role in their cognitively creative escapades. Indeed, researchers have found that raccoon forepaws are mapped onto their cerebral cortex – the outer layer of the brain – in a similar manner as human hands. Both take up a lot of real estate in the brain. As journalist Carl Zimmer wrote, "The hand is where the mind meets the world."

What raccoons can teach us about the human brain

As I argue in my upcoming book "Wild Brains," understanding raccoon intelligence requires observing them in the environments they choose – not confining them to the small, simple spaces that suit rats and mice. So-called living laboratories that monitor wildlife without restricting their behavior may be scientists' best chance at unlocking the secrets of this species' remarkable mind.

In my graduate training, I was taught to avoid anthropomorphizing animal research subjects – to resist the temptation to project human thoughts and emotions onto nonhuman minds, because human brains likely contribute to uniquely human cognitive and emotional experiences. But primatologist Frans de Waal later introduced the useful counterpoint of anthropodenial: the mistaken assumption that animals cannot share emotional or cognitive capacities with humans simply because they are not human.

The drunken Ashland raccoon captured global attention not just because the story was funny, but because it felt familiar. People recognized something of themselves in this curious, impulsive, problem-solving animal navigating a very human environment. A willingness to lean away from anthropodenial – while remaining grounded in rigorous science – may open new paths for understanding raccoon intelligence and, ultimately, the wonderfully complex human brain.

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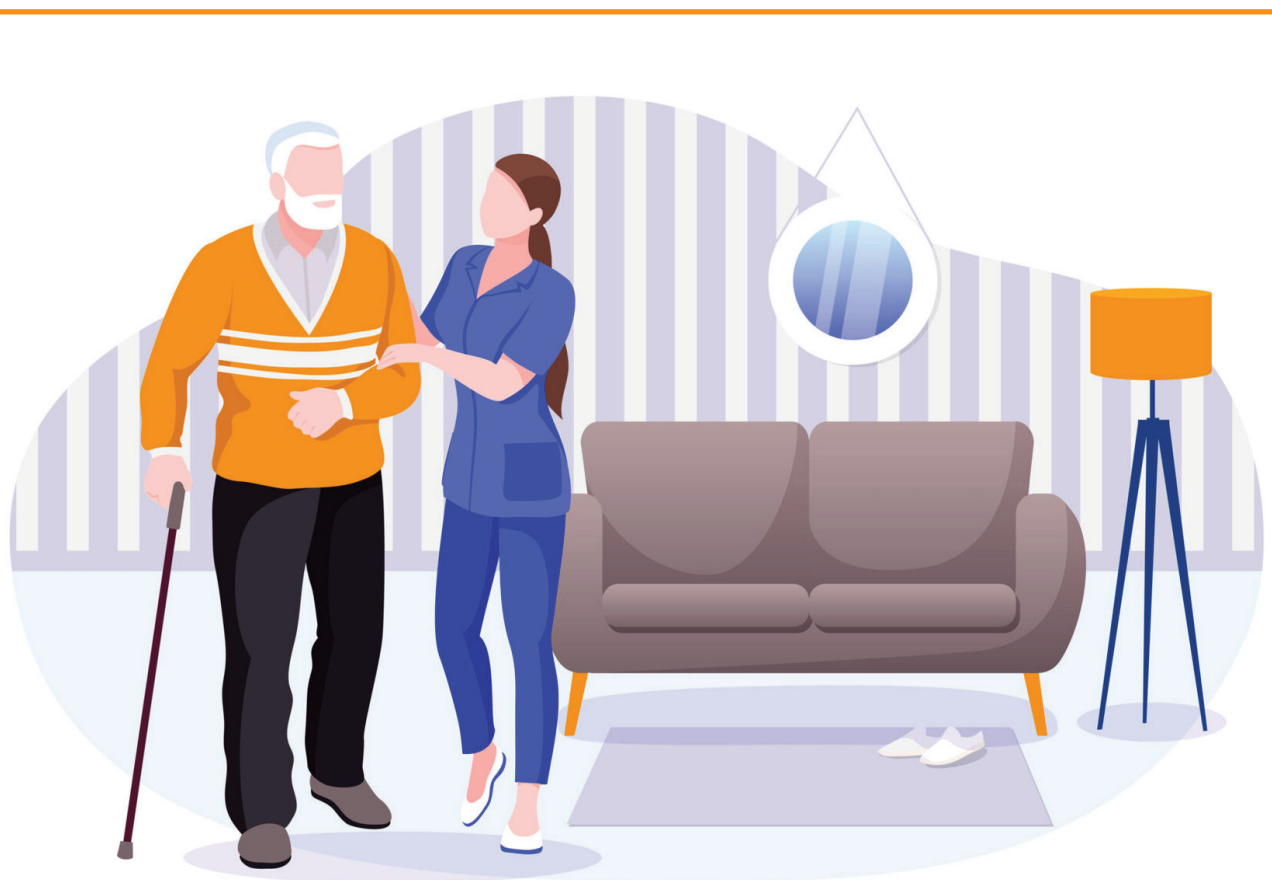
HEALTH



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Medicaid underwrites home care for low-income older adults who have few assets, though the Trump administration's new budget will slash Medicaid by more than $900 billion over the next decade. The well-off theoretically can pay out-of-pocket.

Solving the home care quandary

By PAULA SPAN
KFF Health News (TNS)

You're ready to leave the hospital, but you don't feel able to care for yourself at home yet.

Or, you've completed a couple of weeks in rehab. Can you handle your complicated medication regimen, along with shopping and cooking?

Perhaps you fell in the shower, and now your family wants you to arrange help with bathing and getting dressed.

There are facilities that provide such help, of course, but most older people don't want to go there. They want to stay at home; that's the problem.

When older people struggle with daily activities because they have grown frail, because their chronic illnesses have mounted, or because they have lost a spouse or companion, most don't want to move. For decades, surveys have shown that they prefer to remain in their homes for as long as possible.

That means they need home care, either from family and friends, paid caregivers, or both. But paid home care represents an especially strained sector of the long-term care system, which is experiencing an intensifying labor shortage even as an aging population creates surging demand.

"It's a crisis," said Madeline Sterling, a primary care doctor at Weill Cornell Medicine and the director of Cornell University's Initiative on Home Care Work. "It's not really working for the people involved," whether they are patients (who can also be younger people with disabilities), family members, or home care workers.

"This is not about what's going to happen a decade from now," said Steven Landers, chief executive of the National Alliance for Care at Home, an industry organization. "Do an Indeed.com search in Anytown, USA, for home care aides, and you'll see so many listings for aides that your eyes will pop out."

Against this grim backdrop, however, some alternatives show promise in upgrading home care jobs and in improving patient care. And they're growing.

Some background: Researchers and elder care administrators have warned about this approaching calamity for years. Home care is already among the nation's fastest-growing occupations, with 3.2 million home health aides and personal care aides on the job in 2024, up from 1.4 million a decade earlier, according to PHI, a research and advocacy group.

But the nation will need about 740,000 additional home care workers over the next decade, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and recruiting them won't be easy. Costs to consumers are high – the median hourly rate for a home health aide in 2024 was $34, the annual Genworth/CareScout survey shows, with big geographic variations. But an aide's median hourly wage was less than $17.

These remain unstable, low-paying jobs. Of the largely female workforce, about a third of whom are immigrants, 40 percent live in low-income households and most receive some sort of public assistance.

Even if the agencies that employ them offer health insurance and they work enough hours to qualify, many cannot afford their premium payments.

Unsurprisingly, the turnover rate approaches 80 percent annually, according to a survey by the ICA Group, a nonprofit organization that promotes co-ops.

But not everywhere. One innovation, still small but expanding: home care cooperatives owned by the workers themselves. The first and largest, Cooperative Home Care Associates in the Bronx borough of New York City, began in 1985 and now employs about 1,600 home care aides. The ICA Group now counts 26 such worker-owned home care businesses nationwide.

"These co-ops are getting exceptional results," said Geoffrey Gusoff, a family medicine doctor and health services researcher at UCLA. "They have half the turnover of traditional agencies, they hold onto clients twice as long, and they're paying $2 more an hour" to their owner-employees.

When Gusoff and his co-authors interviewed co-op members for a qualitative study in JAMA Network Open, "we were expecting to hear more about compensation," he said. "But the biggest single response was, 'I have more say'" over working conditions, patient care, and the administration of the co-op itself.

"Workers say they feel more respected," Gusoff said.

Through an initiative to provide financing, business coaching, and technical assistance, the ICA Group intends to boost the national total to 50 co-ops within five years and to 100 by 2040.

Another approach gaining ground: registries that allow home care workers and clients who need care to connect directly, often without involving agencies that provide supervision and background checks but also absorb roughly half the fee consumers pay.

One of the largest registries, Carina, serves workers and clients in Oregon and Washington. Established through agreements with the Service Employees International Union, the nation's largest health care union, it serves 40,000 providers and 25,000 clients. (About 10 percent of home care workers are unionized, according to PHI's analysis.)

Carina functions as a free, "digital hiring hall," said Nidhi Mirani, its chief executive. Except in the Seattle area, it serves only clients who receive care through Medicaid, the largest funder of care at home. State agencies handle the paperwork and oversee background checks.

Hourly rates paid to independent providers found on Carina, which are set by union contracts, are usually lower than what agencies charge, while workers' wages start at $20, and they receive health insurance, paid time off, and, in some cases, retirement benefits.

Other registries may be operated by states, as in Massachusetts and Wisconsin, or by platforms like Direct Care Careers, available in four states. "People are seeking a fit in who's coming into their homes," Mirani said. "And individual providers can choose their clients. It's a two-way street."

Finally, recent studies indicate ways that additional training for home care workers can pay off.

"These patients have complex conditions," Sterling said of the aides. Home care workers, who take blood pressure readings, prepare meals, and help clients stay mobile, can spot troubling symptoms as they emerge.

Her team's recent clinical trial of home health aides caring for patients with heart failure – "the No. 1 cause of hospitalization among Medicare beneficiaries," Sterling pointed out – measured the effects of a 90-minute virtual training module about its symptoms and management.

"Leg swelling. Shortness of breath. They're the first signs that the disease is not being controlled," Sterling said.

In the study, involving 102 aides working for VNS Health, a large nonprofit agency in New York, the training was shown to enhance their knowledge and confidence in caring for clients with heart failure.

Moreover, when aides were given a mobile health app that allowed them to message their supervisors, they made fewer 911 calls and their patients made fewer emergency room visits.

Small-scale efforts like registries, co-ops, and training programs do not directly address home care's most central problem: cost.

Medicaid underwrites home care for low-income older adults who have few assets, though the Trump administration's new budget will slash Medicaid by more than $900 billion over the next decade. The well-off theoretically can pay out-of-pocket.

But "middle-class retired families either spend all their resources and essentially bankrupt themselves to become eligible for Medicaid, or they go without," Landers said. Options like assisted living and nursing homes are even more expensive.

The United States has never committed to paying for long-term care for the middle class, and it seems unlikely to do so under this administration. Still, savings from innovations like these can reduce costs and might help expand home care through federal or state programs. Several tests and pilots are underway.

Home care workers "have a lot of insight into patients' conditions," Sterling said. "Training them and giving them technological tools shows that if we're trying to keep patients at home, here's a way to do that with the workforce that's already there."

The New Old Age is produced through a partnership with The New York Times. KFF Health News is a national newsroom that produces in-depth journalism about health issues and is one of the core operating programs of KFF – the independent source for health policy research, polling and journalism.

MAYO CLINIC Q&A

What heart-healthy habits should I consider starting in the new year?

By MAYO CLINIC NEWS NETWORK (TNS)

DEAR MAYO CLINIC: Heart disease runs in my family, and I really want to avoid developing it myself if I can. What heart-health habits should I consider starting in the new year?

ANSWER: When it comes to heart health, prevention still delivers the greatest return. Taking steps now – no matter how small – provides far greater benefits than managing heart disease later. Fortunately, there are many practical, sustainable ways to lower your risk, even if heart disease is common in your family.

A good place to begin is with the simple, everyday choices that influence your long-term cardiovascular health. To build healthier habits, start gradually. Improving your diet one step at a time, moving your body throughout the day and avoiding long periods of sitting can make a measurable difference. Small changes add up, and consistency matters more than perfection.

Emotional well-being also plays a vital role in heart health. Activities that bring meaning or connection, such as walking with a friend or focusing on purpose in daily life, can lower stress and support healthier behaviors. Caring for your emotional health isn't separate from caring for your heart; both are deeply interconnected.

Taking medications as directed is another key factor in preventing heart attacks or stroke. If you have been prescribed treatment for high blood pressure, high cholesterol or other risk factors, following your clinician's guidance and monitoring your numbers ensures those risks stay under control.

Heart-healthy steps to consider

Here are eight additional steps that can strengthen your heart-health plan for the year ahead.

1. Avoid tobacco.

Smoking or using smokeless tobacco damages the heart and blood vessels, and it lowers the oxygen available to your body, forcing the heart to work harder. The benefits of quitting begin almost immediately, and the risk of heart disease decreases significantly within a year.

2. Get moving every day.

Aim for 30 minutes or more of physical activity most days of the week. Brisk walking, cycling, gardening, taking the stairs and even brief movement breaks throughout the day all contribute to better cardiovascular fitness. National guidelines recommend at least 150 minutes of moderate or intense activity weekly, but any amount of movement is better than none. If you've been inactive, increase your activity gradually.

3. Follow a heart-healthy eating plan.

Diet affects many major risk factors, including blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar. Heart-healthy patterns such as the Mediterranean diet and DASH eating plan emphasize fruits, vegetables, legumes, fish, lean protein, low-fat dairy products, whole grains, and healthy fats like olive oil and avocado. Limiting salt, added sugars, refined carbohydrates, alcohol, saturated fat and processed foods, including processed meat, further protects your heart.

4. Maintain a healthy weight.

Excess weight, especially around your belly, raises the risk of high blood pressure, high cholesterol, type 2 diabetes, sleep apnea and heart disease. Even modest weight loss of 3 percent to 5 percent can improve blood sugar, triglycerides and overall metabolic health.

5. Prioritize quality sleep.

Adults typically need at least seven hours of sleep each night. Poor sleep is linked to obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes and heart disease. Maintain a consistent sleep schedule and a restful environment. If you snore loudly, wake up gasping or feel excessively tired despite adequate sleep, talk to your clinician about screening for obstructive sleep apnea.

6. Manage stress in healthy ways.

Chronic stress can elevate blood pressure and affect lifestyle choices. Techniques such as mindfulness, yoga, relaxation exercises, mindful breathing, physical activity and seeking social support can lessen stress and improve overall well-being.

7. Stay up to date with screening tests.

High blood pressure, high cholesterol and high blood sugar often develop silently. Regular screenings allow early detection and treatment. Your clinician can recommend how often to check your numbers based on your age and risk profile.

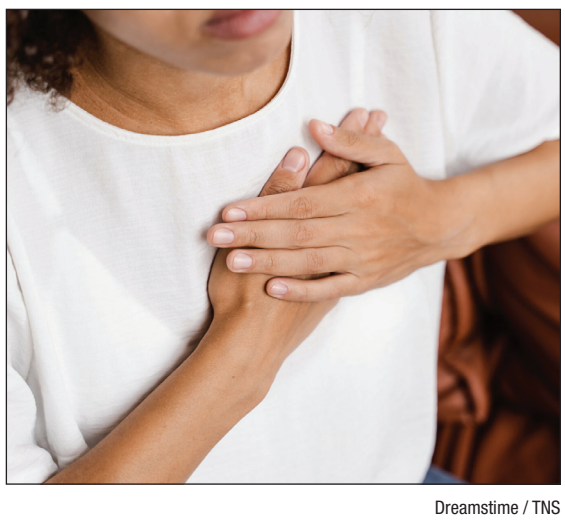
8. Prevent infections.

Good dental care and staying up to date on vaccinations reduce risks associated with infections that can harm the heart or worsen existing conditions.

While you can't change your family history, you can adopt many habits that strengthen and protect your heart. Start with small, manageable steps, stay connected emotionally, take medications as prescribed, and partner with your care team to monitor your health.

Prevention is a powerful investment and the new year offers a perfect opportunity to begin.

– Francisco Lopez-Jimenez, M.D., Cardiovascular Medicine, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota



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Via Getty Images

‘Shared decision-making’ for childhood vaccines sounds empowering

– but it may mean less access for families already stretched thin

By Y. TONY YANG
George Washington University
(The Conversation)

THE CONVERSATION

When federal health officials announced on Jan. 5, 2026, that they were taking six out of 17 vaccines off the childhood immunization schedule, they argued that the move would give parents and caregivers more choice.

Instead of all U.S. children routinely receiving them, these six vaccines are now optional – available to families who request them after consulting a clinician, through a process called shared clinical decision-making, officials said. All six – hepatitis A, hepatitis B, influenza, rotavirus, meningococcal disease and COVID-19 – will still be covered by federal programs such as Medicaid and the Vaccines for Children program, and by private insurers, at least through 2026.

I’m a health policy researcher and the co-author of the book “Vaccine Law and Policy.” I’ve spent years studying how vaccine laws and regulations affect uptake – and who gets left behind when policies change.

Shared decision-making sounds straightforward: a patient and their doctor putting their heads together to make an informed choice. But when applied to routine childhood vaccines, the concept shifts the burden of deliberation onto already-stretched clinicians and parents.

What is shared decision-making?

Shared decision-making is an approach doctors use when there’s genuinely more than one reasonable choice – say, weighing two cancer treatments with different side effects – and the “right” answer depends on what matters most to the patient. The idea is that doctor and patient talk it through together to help make the decision that feels right for that patient.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention uses this term for vaccines that aren’t automatically recommended for everyone but that might make sense for some people after a conversation with their doctor.

The key difference is what happens if no conversation takes place. For routine vaccines, the default is yes. Children get the shot unless there’s a medical reason not to. For shared clinical decision-making vaccines, there’s no default. If the conversation doesn’t happen, neither does the vaccine.

That distinction matters because the federal vaccine advisory committee has historically reserved shared decision-making for narrow situations. One example is the HPV vaccine for adults 27 to 45. Most people in that age group have already been exposed to HPV, so the vaccine helps some individuals but won’t change infection rates overall. In that case, a conversation with your doctor makes sense: The benefit depends on your personal circumstances.

Childhood vaccines against rotavirus and hepatitis B are different. They’re not for a small subset of people who might benefit – they prevent tens of thousands of hospitalizations a year.

When a vaccine is routine, it pops up as an alert in a child’s medical records and becomes part of the clinic’s standard workflow. The nurse draws it up, the doctor gives a heads-up to the parent, and the shot happens before the family leaves. Parents and other caregivers typically encounter it as part of normal pediatric care rather than as a separate decision to weigh.

That’s important because even in well-resourced practices, pediatricians already have limited time to cover many priorities – growth, feeding, sleep, development, safety and any questions the family may have. For lower-income families, who often face even shorter appointments and have fewer options for follow-up visits, that limitation can get magnified.

Studies have found that many low-income families do not receive all recommended care, in part because their time with the doctor during routine visits is so short.

What this looks like for a family coming in for a checkup

Even before this policy change, lower-income children in the U.S. were falling behind on vaccines. From 2011 to 2021, kids in higher-income families got more of their shots on time, while kids in lower-income families didn’t keep pace – and that gap kept widening.

Here’s how the new policy could make things harder:

A mother brings her 2-month-old to a clinic that serves mostly low-income families – the kind of practice that sees 25 or 30 kids a day for well-child visits. Under the old schedule, the visit runs on rails: The nurse pulls up the baby’s chart, sees that six vaccines are due, draws them up, and the doctor gives them during the exam. By the time Mom is buckling the car seat, the shots are done. The whole vaccine portion takes a few minutes.

Under the new policy, two of those vaccines – rotavirus and hepatitis B – are no longer automatic. Now, the doctor has to stop and have a conversation to explain what rotavirus and hepatitis B are, walk through the risks and benefits of each vaccine and ask what the parent wants to do.

That’s fine if there’s time. But this visit is 15 minutes long, and the doctor still has to check the baby’s growth, ask about their feeding and sleep habits and make sure development is on track. If the mother has questions or feels unsure, the clinic might ask her to come back or wait for a phone call. But she took two hours off her shift to get here and she doesn’t have paid leave. There may not be a next visit.

Now multiply that by every baby on the schedule that day. And this is just the 2-month visit. The same thing will happen at other ages when other vaccines that moved out of the “routine” category come due. Something has to give. Often, it’s the vaccines that no longer happen automatically.

Why more ‘choice’ can mean less access

Talking with families about vaccines already takes time. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, more than half of pediatricians report spending from 10 to 19 minutes counseling parents about vaccines, and nearly 1 in 10 spend more than 20 minutes – often several times per day.

Shared decision-making takes even longer. When vaccines are routine, the system does most of the work. When they require shared decision-making, that work lands on the doctor and parent in an already-packed appointment. The doctor must walk through the disease and the vaccine’s benefits and risks, ask what concerns the parent has, make sure they understand, and then document the whole conversation.

That’s one more barrier to vaccination, and one that won’t fall evenly. Getting medical care can take more time for families with fewer resources. When a policy change adds steps, those families feel it most.

The data might end up showing that some parents “chose” not to vaccinate. But for many families, it won’t really be a choice – it will be a reflection of who had time to come back, and who didn’t.

Y. Tony Yang is an endowed professor of health policy and associate dean at George Washington University.

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ASK THE PEDIATRICIAN

How to talk with your teen about drugs an alcohol: What I tell every parent

By SCOTT HADLAND
MD, MPH, MS, FAAP
American Academy of Pediatrics
(TNS)

After years of talking with teens and their parents about substance use, here’s the single most important thing I’ve learned: Connection matters more than control.

I hear it from parents all the time: “I’m scared my teen might be using drugs, but I don’t know how to bring it up.” These fears are valid.

Although most teens don’t use drugs or alcohol, some do: Adolescence is a time of exploration and risk-taking, and today’s substances – from high-potency cannabis to counterfeit pills laced with fentanyl – are far more dangerous than in previous decades. Despite these fears, a December 2025 University of Michigan study found that drug use among U.S. teens remained low for the fifth year in a row after a sharp decline in 2020/2021.

And here’s the good news: You have more influence than you think. Here, I’ll share what I often tell parents in my clinic. This is practical advice drawn from research and my experience having real-life conversations to help you keep your teen safe, supported and informed.

When parents worry about substance use, the first instinct is often to tighten the reins: take away a teen’s phone, search their room and threaten punishment. But research and experience show that what teens need most is connection, not control. Instead of jumping right to discipline, start a conversation. It’s best to have these talks early and often, long before you’re worried that your teen has come home after using drugs or alcohol. Conversations are more productive when they happen outside the heat of the moment, when everyone is calm and open.

Ask open-ended questions like, “What have you heard about vaping at school?” or “How do your friends feel about drinking?” When teens feel judged, they shut down. But when they feel heard, they often open up.

Trust is protective. Scare tactics, on the other hand, can backfire. They can damage communication and make teens less likely to come to you when they’re in trouble. Research shows that when teens feel mistrusted or shamed, they’re more likely to hide their behavior rather than change it. Building a foundation of openness and honesty gives you more influence in the long run.

Substance use looks different now than it did a generation ago. While alcohol is still the most commonly used substance among teens, high-potency cannabis use – especially in the form of vapes or edibles – is increasingly common. Nicotine vaping has also surged in recent years.

One of the biggest concerns today is the risk of counterfeit pills. Some teens experiment with pills that they believe to be Xanax, Percocet or Adderall – when in fact, they may contain fentanyl or other drugs. Even one pill can be fatal because these contaminants are often highly potent and can cause an overdose quickly.

Staying informed about what teens are actually using can help you have more meaningful conversations. When teens sense that you’re up to date on what’s happening in their world, they’re more likely to take you seriously. It also shows them that you care enough to understand, not just to judge.

Sometimes, it’s hard to tell whether a teen is experimenting or truly struggling. If you notice changes in mood, sleep, appetite, school performance or friendships, bring it up with your pediatrician.

Pediatricians are trained to screen for substance use and mental health concerns. In addition, teens often feel more comfortable talking to a doctor than to a parent. In some cases, your pediatrician may recommend a counselor, therapist or substance-use specialist. For teens who are dealing with true addiction, it’s more common than not that they’re also facing another mental health condition like anxiety, depression, ADHD or trauma. Treating both mental health and substance use problems together is essential – and help is available.

One of the most important goals in adolescence is delaying substance use for as long as possible. The earlier a teen starts using substances, the more likely they are to develop a substance use disorder later in life. For example, teens who start using cannabis before age 18 are twice as likely to go on to have a problem with substance use disorder than if they start later.

That said, the goal shouldn’t be perfection– it’s protection. Even if your teen has experimented, you can still make a difference. Be curious, and ask questions like, “How might you respond if someone at a party offers you a drink?” Play to a teen’s strengths. For example, if your teen has an independent streak, tap into that. You might say, “You’ve never been someone who follows the crowd – how do you think that could help you make decisions if friends start using drugs or alcohol? “There is a lot of positive messaging about alcohol and drugs on TV and in social media; sometimes you might be the only voice sharing that you think it’s important not to use substances. Make a clear recommendation that you don’t want your teen to use. You might say, for example, “I care so much about your health and safety. I don’t want you using alcohol or other drugs, especially while your brain is still developing.” Teens may roll their eyes – but research shows they still hear you, and it matters.

One of the most important family rules to establish is about never driving under the influence – or riding with someone who is. Let your teen know they can always call or text you (or another trusted adult) for a ride, no questions asked.

If you’re not available, ride share services like Uber or Lyft can be a good backup option – but only if your teen knows how to use them safely.

It’s also worth talking about naloxone (Narcan), a medication that reverses opioid overdoses. Naloxone is safe, easy to use, and available in most pharmacies without a prescription. Every household – especially those with teens – should have it on hand.

The most powerful prevention tool you have is your ongoing relationship with your teen. Don’t worry about giving one perfect lecture. What matters most is having lots of small conversations over time. Talk during a car ride, while doing dishes, over Sunday family breakfast or at bedtime. Be curious. Be calm. Let them know you’re always there to talk – about anything. Even if your teen has already experimented, it’s never too late to help guide them.

Scott Hadland, MD, MPH, MS, FAAP, is a practicing pediatrician and addiction specialist. He serves as Chief of Adolescent Medicine at Mass General Brigham for Children and an Associate Professor of Pediatrics at Harvard Medical School.

Lukas Gojda / Dreamstime / TNS

When parents worry about substance use, the first instinct is often to tighten the reins. But research and experience show that what teens need most is connection, not control.

FINANCE

Chip Somodevilla / Getty Images / TNS

Tech billionaires Michael Dell (left) and Susan Dell join U.S. President Donald Trump to make an announcement about "Trump accounts" in the Roosevelt Room at the White House on Dec. 2, 2025, in Washington, D.C.

What you need to know about the 'Trump Accounts'

And how to get in on this new program

By TREVOR BACH
The Dallas Morning News (TNS)

As President Donald Trump's core Big Beautiful Bill legislation advanced through Congress late last spring, he also began talking about a new government investment plan for kids.

"This is a pro-family initiative that will help millions of Americans harness the strength of our economy to lift up the next generation, and they'll really be getting a big jump on life," the president said from the White House. "Trump Accounts will contribute to the lifelong success of millions of newborn babies."

The savings accounts are now slated to become active on July 5, and Texas politicians and business leaders have also gotten involved. Here's what you need to know about the new government program.

How do the accounts work?

The accounts are a new type of IRA, or Individual Retirement Account, designed to offer kids a long-term savings plan and exposure to the stock market. The money in the accounts must be invested in certain eligible funds, including mutual funds and market-tracking ETFs.

Generally, no withdrawals are allowed until the year the child turns 18: At that point, they can take control of the account and begin making penalty-free withdrawals to use for certain specific purposes like college or starting a business. The withdrawals are subject to ordinary income taxes, plus a 10 percent penalty if they aren't for qualified spending or occur before the account holder turns 59 and a half.

Parents will be able to enroll their child by filing an IRS form or using an online portal that's expected to become available by summer. (The Trump Administration has an email update sign-up form related to the accounts here.)

Isn't the government funding these?

Yes – for newborns. The Trump Administration has promised to seed the new accounts with $1,000 as part of a pilot program. Children who were born after Jan. 1, 2025, are eligible for that seed money, with the program slated to continue for kids born through Dec. 31, 2028. (Roughly 3.6 million babies are born in the U.S. each year, so the $1,000 per kid initiative will come with a price tag of several billion dollars annually.)

What about other contributions?

Besides the $1,000 for newborns, individuals – parents, grandparents, friends – employers and other groups, like charities, are also able to contribute up to a total of $5,000 per year into a single account, although those contributions are not tax-deductible.

In recent weeks, various billionaires and companies have also gotten in on the act. Last month Michael Dell, the Houston-born tech magnate and Uptown Dallas developer, and his wife Susan pledged $6.25 billion to help fund the accounts. The donation promises to fund $250 deposits for at least 25 million kids who are 10 years old and younger, were born before the government funding cutoff of Jan. 1, 2025, and live in ZIP codes where the median household income is below $150,000. That includes most of Dallas-Fort Worth.

"It's designed to help families feel supported from the start and encourage them to keep saving," Michael Dell told CNBC.

After the Dells' massive philanthropic announcement, billionaire hedge fund founder Ray Dalio and his wife Barbara promised a similar donation for kids in Connecticut. Dell Technologies, Mastercard, BlackRock, Block, Uber, Visa, BNY and Charter are also supporting the federal program, with at least some of those companies promising to match the government's donation for their employees.

How else does this connect to Texas?

Texas has a population of roughly 7.5 million kids under 18 who will be eligible for the federal accounts. But the state could also end up starting its own plan in addition to the federal program.

"I love President @realDonaldTrump's idea to invest $1,000 for every American newborn child," Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick wrote on X last month. "If I see a great idea from the President that helps Texans, my first question is always, 'why not do it in Texas, too?'"

Patrick went on to write that the Texas savings account idea, which he dubbed the "New Little Texan Savings Fund," would be a top priority for the 2027 legislative session and cost around $400 million per year.

Last month Westlake-based Charles Schwab also announced it would match the federal government's $1,000 donation for children born to employees. The financial services giant has several thousand local employees.

How are people reacting?

Plenty of parents whose kids will be eligible for the accounts – especially for the promised $1,000 seed money – are quite happy, of course. The financial services industry, which stands to benefit from tens of billions of dollars potentially flowing into the markets, is also excited.

The federal initiative has also inspired at least an inkling of bipartisan support, with Sens. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, and Cory Booker, D-N.J. – a longtime advocate of "baby bonds" as a mechanism to narrow the country's wealth gap – recently teaming up on an effort to encourage Fortune 1000 CEOs to contribute to the accounts.

"I think there's a lot of things we can do to improve it," Booker recently told the website Roll Call, "but for every child in America to have an individual investment account could be game-changing, especially if we can get the number of that initial investment up as much as possible."

Cruz has also championed the Texas effort, calling it "fantastic," although the state push has generated pushback from small-government groups. "We are opposed to this idea before the bill is even filed," Texas Policy Research, an influential conservative nonprofit, wrote on social media. "Creating state-run wealth accounts for every newborn violates key liberty principles: it expands government rather than limiting it, replaces personal responsibility with state dependency, and undermines free enterprise by turning the state into an investor."

What do experts say?

Economists of various persuasions have long promoted the idea of giving kids nest eggs as vehicles to build wealth and narrow inequality. But the Trump Accounts plan, while drawing some praise, has sparked criticism for various reasons.

Even as its backers promote the accounts as a populist-style mechanism to level the economic playing field for all Americans, critics have pointed out that the program, which comes with a $1,000 government seed but otherwise relies on additional outside contributions, means it's more likely to benefit wealthy kids than poorer kids whose parents can't afford to fork over thousands more annually.

"We already have extremely significant wealth gaps by income, by race, by gender," Amy Matsui, vice president for child care and income security at the National Women's Law Center, told PBS NewsHour. "And the way that this policy is structured, it's not going to narrow them. It has the potential to widen them."

Experts also say that the requirement that parents sign up, as opposed to having kids enrolled automatically, is also likely to leave out millions of eligible participants, while the program's limited tax benefits mean it's probably an inferior savings plan than existing programs like Roth IRAs or 529 college plans.

Still, for a baby who receives the $1,000 seed money, the account balance is likely to rise to at least several thousand dollars by the time they turn 18, even without additional contributions from parents or employers. Many economists are pushing for reforms, but free money is still free money.

"Better than nothing," Theresa Ghilarduci, a labor economist, said of the program.

Paxton Media Group

FOOD

5 SIMPLE DINNERS TO EASE BACK INTO COOKING IN THE NEW YEAR

Seared shrimp tacos stuffed with cabbage slaw. Gretchen McKay / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette / TNS

By GRETCHEN MCKAY
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (TNS)

Still suffering from a post-holiday drag? After the fun of Christmas and New Year's, it's completely understandable if you're having a hard time snapping back into a routine.

The fact that it's still getting light too late and dark too early – we won't set our clocks forward for spring until March 8 – only adds to the funk that is a Western Pennsylvania winter, marked by gray skies, a freezing mix of snow and rain and slushy sidewalks.

After a steady diet of festive desserts, rich and hearty sides and too much alcohol, "everyday" cooking might feel daunting on a busy weeknight. A relaxed holiday schedule has left many of us out of practice in getting dinners on the table at a set time. And if you've over-indulged over the past few weeks, you might be trying to eat less to shed those extra holiday pounds.

We get it. It can be tough to get back on track and re-establish home cooking habits, especially when the frozen dinner aisle and takeout make it so easy to compromise. That's why it's often best to start the process with baby steps – simple meals that don't call for lots of ingredients or take too much time (or effort) start to finish.

To help inspire you, we've assembled five flavorful recipes that each require no more than six everyday ingredients and only take about a half hour to prepare on the stovetop.

Don't love washing pans? Me either! All of the following are made and served from a single skillet, guaranteeing easy cleanup.

There is a slight catch: All five dishes assume you have kitchen staples like vegetable oil or extra-virgin olive oil, salt and pepper, garlic cloves, unsalted butter, sugar and various spices already on hand.

All prove, however, that sometimes the simplest dinners are the best ones, and they don't have to be boring.

Easy Lemon Chicken

Serves 4

I've made this dish for my family too many times to count, and still it's a favorite. You can use less butter if you're trying to cut down on fat and calories. For a gluten-free dish, dust the chicken in cornstarch or almond flour instead of all-purpose flour.

I think it's best on rice, but kids love their noodles!

2 whole chicken breasts, boned, skinned and halved
4 tablespoons butter, divided
2 tablespoons olive oil
1 1/2 cups unbleached flour
Salt and pepper
2 lemons
Chopped fresh parsley
Cooked rice or noodles, for serving

Wash and dry chicken breasts. Pound them flat between two pieces of waxed paper or inside a resealable plastic bag with a mallet or rolling pin.

Melt 2 tablespoons butter and oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Pour flour in a plastic bag, season with salt and pepper, and drop the breasts in to coat. Shake off excess flour.

Turn heat up to moderately high and put chicken breasts in the skillet. Depending on how thin you've pounded them, they should cook approximately 3 minutes on each side or until cooked through and still tender. When they're done, season with salt and pepper, remove to a plate and set aside while you make the sauce.

Add 2 remaining tablespoons of butter to the chicken skillet and melt, scraping up brown bits in the pan.

Juice 1 lemon and slice the other. Add juice and lemon slices to skillet and cook until bubbly, then return chicken to the pan, spooning sauce over. Garnish with fresh parsley.

Serve with rice or cooked noodles.

Gretchen McKay, Post-Gazette

Rigatoni with Tomato Cream Sauce

Serves 4

Nothing is more comforting in winter than a bowl of pasta with red sauce. Here, crushed tomatoes simmer with cream and grated Parmesan to create a super-fast super-savory sauce for rigatoni. Add a simple green salad and loaf of crusty Italian bread for a complete meal.

6 tablespoons unsalted butter
1 (28-ounce) can whole San Marzano tomatoes
1/2 cup heavy cream
1 tablespoon concentrated tomato paste
1/3 cup grated Parmesan cheese, plus more for serving
Salt, to taste
Red pepper flakes, to taste
4 cups cooked rigatoni or penne noodles

A quick one-pan dinner pairs sweet Italian sausage with cheese tortellini and grape tomatoes.

In a deep skillet, heat butter until melted.

Add tomatoes to pan, crushing them with a fork or potato masher. Simmer, stirring often, until the tomatoes have broken down, about 10 minutes. Season to taste with salt.

Stir in heavy cream and tomato paste and cook until the sauce thickens slightly, about 3 minutes. Stir in Parmesan cheese and toss to combine. Taste, add salt and, if you like some spice, a few pinches of red pepper flakes.

Add cooked pasta to pan and toss to combine.

Serve in warmed bowls, with extra Parmesan cheese.

Gretchen McKay, Post-Gazette

Skillet Tortellini with Sausage and Cherry Tomatoes

Serves 4

Tortellini are great for last-minute meals because they are so easy to cook and go with many different sauces. In this recipe, they are cooked directly in the pan with sweet Italian sausage along with sweet cherry or grape tomatoes.

The original recipe calls for dried tortellini, but I substituted frozen pasta. Fresh basil adds both color and freshness. If you have some grated Parmesan in the fridge, add that, too, for a cheesy finish.

1 pound bulk sweet or hot Italian sausage
2 garlic cloves, sliced thin
12 ounces frozen cheese tortellini
1 pint cherry or grape tomatoes, halved
2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil

Heat 1 tablespoon olive oil in a 12-inch skillet over medium heat until shimmering.

Add sausage and cook, breaking up meat with wooden spoon, until no longer pink, about 4 minutes.

Add garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add 1 cup water, tortellini and a pinch of salt and bring to boil.

Reduce heat to medium and simmer, stirring occasionally, until pasta is tender, about 10-12 minutes.

Stir in tomatoes and cook until slightly softened, about 2 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste, drizzle with olive oil to taste and sprinkle with basil.

Adapted from "Five Ingredient Dinners" by America's Test Kitchen

Pork and Coconut Pineapple Rice

Serves 4

If there ever was a marriage made in culinary heaven, it has to be pork and pineapple. This easy recipe pairs bite-sized chunks of sweet, juicy pineapple with tender bites of teriyaki-marinated pork tenderloin. The combo is piled high on a bed of creamy, equally tropical coconut rice.

FOR PORK:
1/4 – 1/2 cup teriyaki sauce
1 pound pork tenderloin, cut into bite-sized chunks
20-ounce can pineapple chunks, drained, or 1 fresh pineapple, peeled, cored and cubed
Olive oil, for sauteing
FOR RICE:
2 cups jasmine rice
1 (14-ounce) can unsweetened full-fat coconut milk
1 1/2 cups water
1 teaspoon salt
Generous pinch of sugar
Chopped cilantro, for garnish

Marinate pork in 1/4 cup of teriyaki sauce for 2-3 hours or overnight.

Rinse rice in several changes of cold water until the water runs clear. Use a large fine-mesh sieve to drain any remaining water and place rice in a pot.

Add coconut milk, water, salt and sugar. Bring the mixture to a boil over high heat.

Once it starts to boil, turn the heat down to low, cover and cook for 20 minutes. Uncover and continue to cook for 5 minutes, then fluff and cover to keep warm.

While rice is cooking, prepare pork. Heat 1 tablespoon olive oil in a nonstick skillet or grill pan over medium-high heat. Add pork, discarding the excess sauce. If you add all the sauce with it, it will steam the meat instead of caramelizing it.

Leave pork undisturbed in the hot pan for a few minutes to get better caramelization. Throw in pineapple and cook for 2-3 minutes so it gets saucy and caramelized, too. If desired, add a few additional tablespoons of sauce after everything is brown.

Portion cooked rice into bowls and top with a scoop or two of the saucy pineapple pork. Finish with chopped cilantro and slices of pickled jalapeño, if you happen to have any in the fridge.

Adapted from pinchofyum.com

Single-Seared Garlic Shrimp Tacos

Serves 4

Tacos are a welcome weeknight meal because they don't take a lot of time or effort. These feature quick marinated shrimp and an easy green cabbage slaw. They're simple but super satisfying.

Both flour and corn tortillas work; just be sure to warm them on a hot skillet or in the microwave before stuffing them with shrimp and cabbage to keep them pliable.

2 limes
Salt and pepper
2 cups thinly sliced cabbage
1/2 small red onion
4 teaspoons, plus 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil, divided
3 garlic cloves, minced
1 1/2 teaspoons chili powder
24 large shrimp (about 1-1 1/2 pounds), peeled, deveined and patted dry
1 bunch fresh cilantro, roughly chopped (about ½ cup)
8 corn or flour tortillas, warmed in a microwave or on a hot skillet

In large bowl, whisk juice from 1 lime, 1 teaspoon salt and 1/4 teaspoon pepper.

Mix in cabbage and onion. Set aside, tossing occasionally, while you prepare the shrimp.

In medium bowl, stir together 2 teaspoons oil, half the minced garlic, chili powder, 1 teaspoon salt and 1/2 teaspoon pepper. Add shrimp and stir to combine. Allow to marinate for 5 minutes.

In a 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high, heat 1 teaspoon of oil until shimmering.

Add half the shrimp in an even layer and cook, undisturbed, until deep golden brown on the bottoms, about 2 minutes. Stir, then transfer to plate.

Repeat with another 1 teaspoon oil and the remaining shrimp, but leave shrimp in pan. Return first batch to pan.

Add remaining minced garlic; cook over medium, stirring, until the shrimp are opaque throughout, about 1 minute.

Transfer to a clean plate or bowl.

Add remaining 1 tablespoon oil and cilantro to the cabbage mixture and toss to combine. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Divide the shrimp among the tortillas (3 to each), top with cabbage mixture and serve with lime wedges.

Adapted from "Milk Street Shorts: Recipes That Pack a Punch" by Christopher Kimball

Nina Kiri in the movie "Undertone."
Dustin Rabin/Courtesy Sundance Institute / TNS

Movies we're excited to see at the Sundance Film Festival

By VANESSA FRANKO, AMY NICHOLSON, MARK OLSEN and JOSHUA ROTHKOPF
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

Can it really be the festival's final year in Park City, Utah? Braced as we are for nostalgia at every world premiere in the Eccles or every late night spent at the Library with a cup of chili, Sundance should supply plenty of newness. Below, find our picks for movies to prioritize. We've either seen these already or have it on good authority that your time won't be wasted.

'The Best Summer'

You know the Instagram meme where people say they don't want a new year; they'll take a gently used 1995 instead, accompanied by a photo of them in high school, stovepipe jeans and all? That hit of nostalgia is what I hope "The Best Summer" from director Tamra Davis ("Billy Madison" "Crossroads," "Half Baked") will deliver. The documentary promises never-before-seen concert footage, backstage banter and interviews on tour from the Summersault festival in Australia in 1995. At the time, Davis was recently wed to Mike D of the Beastie Boys, among the artists on the bill. It also features some of the biggest alternative rock artists of the era, including Sonic Youth, Foo Fighters, Pavement, Rancid, Beck, the Amps and Bikini Kill. Even more poignant, the footage was discovered as Davis evacuated her Malibu home in the Palisades fire last January.

– Vanessa Franko

'The Disciple'

Wu-Tang Clan is one of the most influential rap groups ever. The collective also recorded one of the most exclusive albums ever, 2015's "Once Upon a Time in Shaolin." Recorded in secret, the lone copy of the 31-track double album sold for millions at auction – to "Pharma Bro" Martin Shkreli. In "The Disciple," Oscar-winning director Joanna Natasegara ("The White Helmets") dives into the story of Cilvaringz, the Dutch-Moroccan producer and rapper who has a decades-long history with the Wu-Tang Clan and ultimately conceptualized and produced the mysterious album. The story itself is compelling but the possibility of hearing a snippet of the secretive music is even more so.

– V.F.

'Hanging by a Wire'

This sounds like a perfect piece of programming for a ski town that becomes a film festival for a week – sort of like if Cannes were ever to book a movie called "The Killer Croissant." (Anyone heading to Deer Valley for a drink afterward should take the lift up the mountainside.) The documentary itself, about a real-life Himalayan cable-car mishap in northern Pakistan that left eight people dangling for hours, sounds like my kind of thriller, bolstered by re-enactments with some of the actual participants (why would you ever agree to that?), drone footage, catty infighting and heroic rescue attempts. Fun fact: There's a TV movie from 1979 starring Patty Duke that has this same scenario and a very similar title. But because an award-winning documentarian is making this one (director Mohammed Ali Naqvi), you can expect the terror to be upped significantly.

– Joshua Rothkopf

'The History of Concrete'

Nine years ago, the documentarian John Wilson came to Sundance to shoot a six-minute short called "Escape From Park City," satirizing a film festival he didn't think would ever let him in. That snippet of anthropological absurdism mutated into the brain-melting TV show "How to With John Wilson," and now, the Emmy-nominated prankster-humanist has a feature playing on opening night. "The History of Concrete" is about the history of concrete – he's not kidding about that – but as ever, his expedition whizzes the audience from one unexpected pit stop to another. A pilgrimage to the oldest concrete road in America detours to meeting a descendant of the undertaker who embalmed Chef Boyardee. Wilson's free-wheeling curiosity will leave you noticing things like the patterns in discarded sidewalk chewing gum. The audience must connect the dots, but I think he's mourning our country's crumbled civic and cultural infrastructure while encouraging artists to be the weeds that sprout from the cracks.

– Amy Nicholson

William Greaves Productions / Courtesy Sundance Institute / TNS
Harlem Renaissance luminaries gather in a scene from the documentary "Once Upon a Time in Harlem."

John Wilson / Courtesy Sundance Institute / TNS
A scene from the movie "The History of Concrete."

'The Incomer'

Domhnall Gleeson made his name in films like "Ex Machina" and "The Revenant" and as snippy General Hux in the "Star Wars" movies. Suddenly, he's pivoting to laughs, and he's pretty great as the toilet-tissue-salesman-turned-newspaper-editor in "The Paper" a spinoff of the beloved sitcom "The Office." Louis Paxton's "The Incomer" casts Gleeson as a Scottish government official assigned to bring mainland culture – i.e., guacamole and web-surfing – to two isolated, suspicious islanders, a pair of siblings played by Grant O'Rourke and Gayle Rankin ("House of the Dragon"). Imagine a 21st century take on Margaret Mead befriending Samoans, only with cozy knit sweaters and a dash of animation. Buzz has it that this British comedy is as strange, lovely, droll and surprising as last year's Sundance premiere "The Ballad of Wallis Island," a movie I've been raving about ever since.

– A.N.

'Josephine'

An 8-year-old girl witnesses a violent crime in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, setting off a powerful, unpredictable chain of events. As the girl (a riveting Mason Reeves) begins to process what she saw and what it all could mean, she begins acting out in haunting, unexpected ways, her parents (Gemma Chan and Channing Tatum) struggling with how best to help her through it. Inspired by an incident from writer-director Beth de Araújo's childhood, the project predates her debut feature, the 2022 single-take thriller "Soft & Quiet," but has only now been completed. Attuned to the nuts-and-bolt details of the legal system surrounding children, the film is emotionally sensitive and psychologically insightful to the fallout of dealing with something well beyond one's experience, understanding or maturity.

– Mark Olsen

'Once Upon a Time in Harlem'

Both a discovery and a reemergence, "Once Upon a Time in Harlem" is like a time machine moving in multiple directions at once. In 1972, filmmaker William Greaves reconvened a group of artists and luminaries from the Harlem Renaissance including musicians, playwrights, poets and scholars at Duke Ellington's townhouse for an afternoon of reminiscing and rumination. Greaves was unable to complete the film before his death in 2014 and it was Greaves' son David, a cameraman on the day, who eventually returned to the footage to see it to fruition. The result is at once a tribute to a fleeting moment and a consideration of a more enduring legacy, at times painful, elsewhere joyous. At a moment when cultural histories are being rewritten or erased, stepping back some 50 years to revisit events even decades earlier creates a genuine bridge across time.

– M.O.

'The Only Living Pickpocket in New York'

No one wants to resuscitate crime in Manhattan but you can't blame John Turturro's petty thief if he's nostalgic for an era when wallets still held cash. How's he going to steal some rich schmuck's Bitcoin? He doesn't even own a cellphone. "The Only Living Pickpocket in New York's" retro cinematography and funky soul score nod to '70s New York, yet what most seems to motivate writer-director Noah Segan is seeing if the old ways of doing things still have legs – be they watch-stealing or filmmaking. Turturro is exactly the right actor to play an aging hustler in a cast rounded out by Steve Buscemi and Giancarlo Esposito. (Their own history with him dates back to "Miller's Crossing" and "Do the Right Thing.") So it's a major compliment to rising talent Will Price that he's guilty of some scene-stealing as a snotty young gangster scion who wants the mob to explore its "non-fungible options."

– A.N.

'Undertone'

For me, Sundance will always be a place of major horror discoveries: "The Babadook," "The Witch," "Hereditary," the recent "If I Had Legs I'd Kick You" (of course it's a horror movie, don't fool yourself). This Canadian export written and directed by Ian Tuason already debuted at last summer's Fantasia International Film Festival and is preceded by strong word of mouth – the best kind, from people who tell me they don't want to watch it at midnight and then go back to chilly condos. Like the most lingering genre work, it's predominantly reliant (I hear) on sound design, as a podcaster with a paranormal bent (Nina Kiri) gets a little too close to the flame. Mysterious recordings play a part. Nothing will keep me away from this one, even if that condo is a bit chilly at 3 in the morning.

– J.R.

MOVIE REVIEW

Aleksandar Letic / Cineverse / TNS

Jeremy Irvine as James Sunderland in "Return to Silent Hill," an adaptation of the video game Silent Hill 2.

'Return to Silent Hill' is a video game adaptation that frustrates and compels

By DOMINIC BAEZ
The Seattle Times (TNS)

'Return to Silent Hill'

★★

MPA rating: R (for bloody violent content, language and brief drug use)

Running time: 1:46

How to watch: In theaters

Watching "Return to Silent Hill," the film adaptation of the acclaimed psychological survival horror game Silent Hill 2, is like watching the latter through a broken mirror. All the original elements are there, but what's reflected back is disjointed, a tableau that's familiar but not. The effect has "Return" feeling more like a retelling than an adaptation – one that's frustrating and compelling in equal measure.

For those who haven't played the video game (please, go play it), Silent Hill 2 is a gutting examination of grief that follows James Sunderland as he battles monsters, figurative and literal, in his quest to find his wife amid the haunting grotesqueries of the lakeside town of Silent Hill. "Return to Silent Hill," directed by Christophe Gans (who also helmed "Silent Hill," the enjoyable if slightly schlocky 2006 film adaptation of the first Silent Hill game), follows the same basic premise – until it doesn't.

James (Jeremy Irving) is still searching for Mary (Hannah Emily Anderson) after receiving a letter from her telling him to return to their special place. Silent Hill is still a place full of despair and its deadly, physical manifestations. But where Silent Hill 2 turns inward into damning introspection, "Return" chooses to lean into external threats, including new ones that were never present in the game.

"Return" oftentimes feels like a continuation of the first game, in which a cult plays a major role. The problem is, these aren't direct sequels; Silent Hill 2, while set in the same town, is its own contained story, almost completely divorced from the first game. So for Gans and co-writers Sandra Vo-Anh and Will Schneider to add those elements here feels jarring to the point of distraction. ("That didn't happen!" was a constant refrain of mine.)

But then something interesting happens late in the film: The discordant elements begin to form into something cohesive and intriguing, if not nearly as memorable as the source material. The film's best moments – James' reflection in a filthy mirror, a heartbreaking conversation with a dying woman – are still the ones pulled directly from the game (the fan service is real here), but the film manages to leave its own mark.

Speaking of what works, Akira Yamaoka's beautifully despairing music is a highlight here. (Yamaoka composed the music for Silent Hill 2.) It often adds a much-needed layer of emotional depth to what's happening on screen and helps distract from the film's generally unimpressive cinematography and stunningly awful visual effects. (The idea that it was OK to add sunny blue skies to any scene in this movie, something nearly anathema to Silent Hill in general, is baffling to me.)

I want to say I like "Return to Silent Hill," but I think I'm simply fascinated by it. It shouldn't work, and it doesn't a lot of the time, but there's something compelling in how it all wraps up, how decisions that floundered in the moment feel a little more justified once the credits roll (which are awesomely stylish for some reason). It doesn't hold a candle to the game, but there's enough here to warrant another visit to this tragic little town.

SERIES REVIEW

'The Beauty' takes on beauty standards with lots of body horror

By ROBERT LLOYD
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

'The Beauty'

Rating: TV-MA

How to watch: 9 p.m. ET Wednesdays on FX and Hulu/Disney+

My favorite thing in "The Beauty," a body-horror procedural adventure from Ryan Murphy and Matthew Hodgson premiering this week on FX and Hulu, is a Chad and Jeremy joke buried in a line of dialogue that will mean nothing to anyone who doesn't know the '60s singing duo responsible for "Distant Shores" and "A Summer Song," or remember their appearance as the Redcoats on "The Dick Van Dyke Show." I can almost feel the satisfaction, the inward chuckle that must have accompanied the writing of it. The rest of the series' 11-episode first season I found somewhat less delightful – but then, delight is the last thing on its mind.

To begin. A supermodel (played by real-life supermodel Bella Hadid) goes berserk on a Paris runway, grabbing water bottles from spectators, draining the contents, throwing bodies around like … empty water bottles. Stealing a motorcycle, she rides recklessly through the streets of Paris as the Prodigy's "Firestarter" thumps on the soundtrack until she's knocked flying by a car. Pulling herself almost together, she enters a cafe, grabs and guzzles more water, causes even more grievous bodily harm, is shot, keeps going and, exiting to the street, is confronted by a phalanx of gendarmes with guns drawn. Then she explodes. Cue opening credits.

The show develops information slowly and out of chronological order, so if you're averse to knowing even the basics of the premise, you may want to stop reading now – though I wouldn't consider any of what follows a spoiler. At the center of the fun is a drug called the Beauty, which can transform the ugliest duckling into the loveliest swan but after a while develops the unfortunate side effect described above, making hotness literal. (This is why we have the FDA, people.) Even more unfortunate, in respect to global health, once a dose is administered – "One shot and you're hot" is the series' log line – it becomes a virus capable of being transmitted sexually, and, given how people are, you know how that'll go.

This alarms the incomparably wealthy character behind the drug – whom press materials identify only as the Corporation (Ashton Kutcher, Hollywood hunk) in order to keep a secret – not because people might die, but because it threatens his plans to market the Beauty, which has crept out of his control and into the world. (It's not a great business plan, anyway.) Indeed, his way of cleaning up problems is murder, to which end he employs a sinister figure called the Assassin (Anthony Ramos), though he will do the job himself if convenient. (Anthony will acquire an assistant assassin, Jeremy, played by Jeremy Pope.)

The case of the exploding supermodel brings into the picture a pair of Paris-based FBI agents, Cooper Madsen (Evan Peters) and Jordan Bennett (Rebecca Hall), and their dry Mulder and Scully banter and tailored-suits panache is my second-favorite thing about "The Beauty." (Unlike Mulder and Scully, we don't have to wait around for them to sleep together; we meet them in bed.) As beautiful people keep blowing up in beautiful places, they'll chase the bug to Venice and Rome and New York, with famous sights highlighted to demonstrate that the production is not doubling locations in Prague or Vancouver.

Philippe Antonello / FX / TNS

Bella Hadid in FX's "The Beauty," from Ryan Murphy and Matthew Hodgson.

Like nearly everything else in this production and milieu, it smells of money (and vacations written into the budget, maybe), but it still might be my third-favorite thing about the series. That the agents speak French and Italian is a nice, elevating touch.

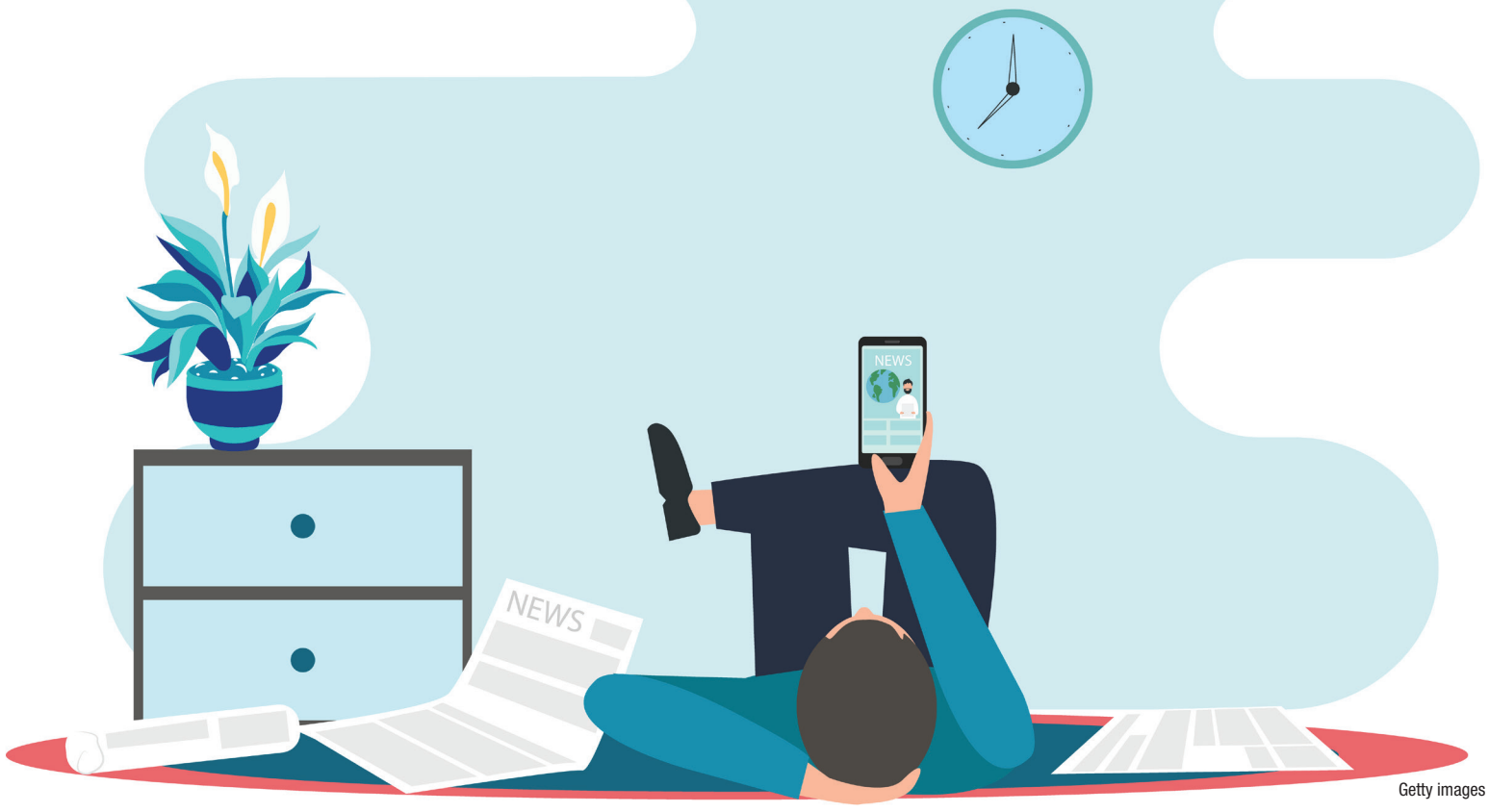
From "The Picture of Dorian Gray" to "The Substance," and most every vampire movie ever made, the search for everlasting youth and beauty never ends well. In the world we still manage to call real, one only has to turn on the news to see the self-inflicted carnage this obsession has wrought. (Notably, Murphy first got hot back in 2003 with "Nip/Tuck," a well-regarded, unpleasant show about cosmetic surgeons.) There is some satirical intent here, I'd wager, regarding the shallow aspirations of this age of Ozempic. That the Corporation has a couple of lunk-headed sons might be meant to call President Donald Trump to mind, though the character stands in for vile billionaires everywhere.

Of course, beauty is subject to taste and culture and all sorts of indefinable things. As Franny Forst, unaccountably married to the Corporation, Isabella Rosselini provides in her person the argument for aging gracefully. (She'll get a speech about it too.) At the same time, Murphy and Hodgson, adapting a comic by Jeremy Haun and Jason A. Hurley, do not hesitate to make a fat person a sad person. The remodeled … patients, I guess you'd call them, though certainly good-looking, are hot in a generic, almost dull way – the women trim, the men muscled – which feels more sad than exciting. A Nobel-winning scientist will be trotted out to offer an "explanation" of how the drug works and what it can do, but it's really just magic beans.

There's plenty of gore and goo – the transformation process is not pretty. Some storylines are meant to be poignant but are overwhelmed by the weirdness or feel exploitative, or the characters aren't dimensional enough to move you. There are plot twists, of course, and rejiggerings, but it's too obvious to be really terrifying; the game is given away early. (That doesn't rule out some icky second-season invention; this one ends on a cliffhanger.)

At the same time, there's enough nonsense, edging into ridiculousness, that the series might best be approached as a black action-comedy – at the end of the opening scene, the gendarmes are splattered with pieces of supermodel – or a very fancy B (maybe C) picture. "Star Wars" built an empire on the latter.

BOOKS



Getty images

DEEP READING

can boost critical thinking, help resist misinformation

By JT TORRES
Washington and Lee University
and JEFF SAERYS-FOY
Quinnipiac University

THE CONVERSATION

The average American checks their phone over 140 times a day, clocking an average of 4.5 hours of daily use, with 57 percent of people admitting they're "addicted" to their phone. Tech companies, influencers and other content creators compete for all that attention, which has incentivized the rise of misinformation.

Considering this challenging information landscape, strong critical reading skills are as relevant and necessary as they've ever been.

Unfortunately, literacy continues to be a serious concern. Reading comprehension scores have continued to decline. The majority of Gen Z parents are not reading aloud to their young children because they view it as a chore. Many college students cannot make it through an entire book.

With their endless scrolling and easy reposting and sharing of content, social media platforms are designed to encourage passive engagement that people use to relieve boredom and escape stress.

As a cognitive scientist and a literacy expert, we research the ways people process information through reading. Based on our work, we believe that deep reading can be an effective way to counter misinformation as well as reduce stress and loneliness. It can be tough to go deeper than a speedy skim, but there are strategies you can use to strengthen important reading skills.

Deep reading versus doomscrolling

People use smartphones and social media for a variety of reasons, such as to relieve boredom, seek attention, make connections and share news. The infinite amount of information available at your fingertips can lead to information overload, interfering with how you pay attention and make decisions. Research from cognitive science helps to explain how scrolling trains your brain to think passively.

To keep people engaged, social media algorithms feed people content similar to what they've already engaged with, reinforcing users' beliefs with similar posts. Repeated exposure to information increases its believability, especially if different sources repeat the information, an effect known as illusory truth.

Deep reading, on the other hand, refers to the intentional process of engaging with information in critical, analytical and empathetic ways. It involves making inferences, drawing connections, engaging with different perspectives and questioning possible interpretations.

Deep reading does require effort. It can trigger negative feelings like irritation or confusion, and it can very often feel unpleasant. The important question, then: Why would anyone choose the hard work of deep reading when they can just scroll and skim?

Motivating mental effort

Mindless scrolling may come with unintended consequences. Smartphone and social media use is associated with increased boredom and loneliness. And doomscrolling is related to higher levels of existential anxiety and misanthropy.

In contrast, attention and effort, despite being exhausting, can deepen your sense of purpose and strengthen social connection. People also feel motivated to complete tasks that help them pursue personal goals, especially when these tasks are recognized by others. For these reasons, sharing books may be one tool to promote deep reading.

One example is a teacher who guides students through longer texts, like novels, paired with active discussions about the books to reinforce comprehension and interpretation. While the debate over the ongoing practice of assigning excerpts over full books in schools continues, evidence does suggest that sustained reading in social settings can promote lifelong enjoyment in reading.

With social connection in mind, social media can actually be used as a positive tool. BookTok is a popular online community of people who use TikTok to discuss and recommend books. Fans post in-depth analyses of "K-Pop Demon Hunters" and other movies or shows, demonstrating that close analysis still has a place in the endless scroll of social media.

Slowing yourself down to read deeply

There are steps you can take to meaningfully engage with the constant stream of information you encounter. Of course, this process can be taxing, and people only have so much effort and attention to expend. It's important to both recognize your limited cognitive resources and be intentional about how you direct those resources.

Simply being aware of how digital reading practices shape your brain can encourage new attitudes and habits toward how you consume information. Just pausing can reduce susceptibility to misinformation. Taking a few extra seconds to consciously judge information can counteract illusory truth, indicating that intentionally slowing down even just a bit can be beneficial.

Reading deeply means being able to intentionally choose when to read at different speeds, slowing down as needed to wrestle with difficult passages, savor striking prose, critically evaluate information, and reflect on the meaning of a text. It involves entering into a dialogue with the text rather than gleaning information.

Awareness does not mean that you never doomscroll at the end of a long day. But it does mean becoming conscious of the need to also stick with a single text more frequently and to engage with different perspectives.

You can start small, perhaps with poems, short stories or essays, before moving up to longer texts. Partner with a friend or family member and set a goal to read a full-length novel or nonfiction book. Accomplish that goal in small chunks, such as reading one chapter a day and discussing what you read with your reading buddy. Practicing deep reading, such as reading novels, can open you up to new perspectives and ideas that you can explore in conversation with others, in person or even on TikTok.

JT Torres is director of the Harte Center for Teaching and Learning, Washington and Lee University. Jeff Saerys-Foy is an associate professor of Psychology, Quinnipiac University.

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BESTSELLERS

Here are the bestsellers for the week that ended Saturday, Jan. 10, compiled from data from independent and chain bookstores, book wholesalers and independent distributors nationwide, powered by Circana BookScan.

Hardcover fiction

1. The Correspondent. Virginia Evans. Crown
2. The First Time I Saw Him. Laura Dave. Scribner
3. The Widow. John Grisham. Doubleday
4. Alchemised. SenLinYu. Del Rey
5. The Secret of Secrets. Dan Brown. Doubleday
6. The Intruder. Freida Mcfadden. Poisoned Pen
7. Gone Before Goodbye. Witherspoon/Coben. Grand Central
8. Mona's Eyes. Thomas Schlesser. Europa
9. Brimstone (deluxe ed.). Callie Hart. Forever
10. Always Remember. Charlie Mackesy. Penguin Life

Hardcover nonficiton

1. Stop, in the Name of God. Charlie Kirk. Winning Team
2. Of Course It's Good! Jessica Secrest. Page Street
3. Eat Your Ice Cream. Ezekiel J. Emanuel. Norton
4. To Die For. Rosie Grant. Harvest
5. 1929. Andrew Ross Sorkin. Viking
6. Nobody's Girl. Virginia Roberts Giuffre. Knopf Publishing
7. What No One Tells You About Money. Jade Warshaw. Ramsey
8. Separation of Church and Hate. John Fugelsang. Avid Reader
9. The Miracles Among Us. Marc Siegel. Harper Influence
10. The Overthinker's Guide to Making Decisions. Joseph Nguyen. Authors Equity

Trade paperback

1. Theo of Golden. Allen Levi. Atria
2. Dungeon Crawler Carl. Matt Dinniman. Ace
3. The Housemaid. Freida McFadden. Grand Central
4. The God of the Woods. Liz Moore. Riverhead
5. The 2026 Old Farmer's Almanac. Old Farmer's Almanac
6. The Atomic Habits Workbook. James Clear. Avery
7. The Surrogate Mother. Freida McFadden. Poisoned Pen
8. The Tenant. Freida McFadden. Poisoned Pen
9. In Your Dreams. Sarah Adams. Dell
10. Remarkably Bright Creatures. Shelby Van Pelt. Ecco

Reprinted from Publishers Weekly.

REVIEW

Another Victorian detective beats Sherlock Holmes at his own game

By CHRIS HEWITT
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

If you're looking for a brand-new mystery with a Sherlock Holmes vibe, you are – as the British heroes of two new books might say – spoiled for choices.

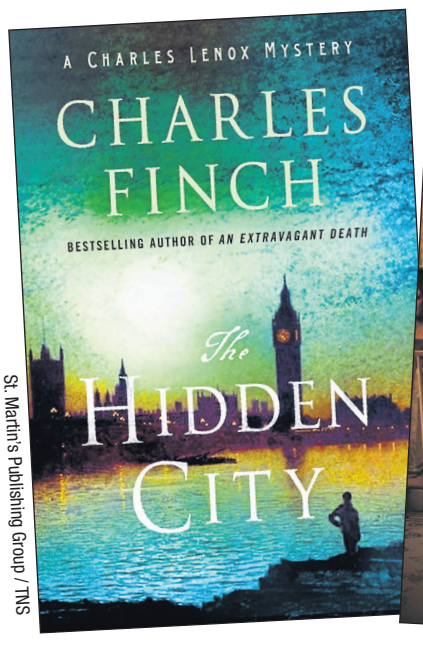
"Sherlock Holmes and the Real Thing" is the latest from Nicholas Meyer, who has been writing his series of (supposedly) newly unearthed mysteries featuring the great detective since the 1970s, when "The Seven-Per-Cent Solution" was a bestseller. His "Real Thing" takes place in the 1890s.

Set in London in 1879, just barely preceding Holmes' era, is Charles Finch's "The Hidden City." It's the 15th in a series that features brilliant sleuth Charles Lenox, who is not Holmes but who's enough like him to please aficionados. Written by Americans, both mysteries have to do with England's class structure and both feature characters fighting for Englishwomen's right to vote.

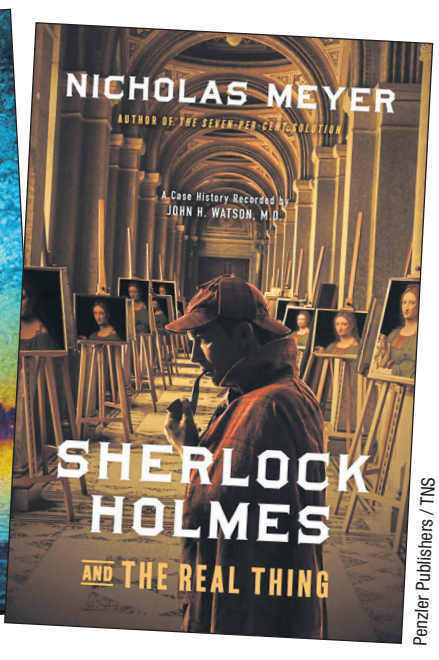
Finch's book is the more elegant of the two and a more compelling mystery. Lenox, who has Holmes' love/hate relationship with Scotland Yard but uses his aristocratic connections to his advantage, awaits a ship at the beginning of "Hidden." Its passengers include his niece Angela, whose father died recently in India, and her companion Sari.

All of them become embroiled in a series of murders that dates back several years and involves, somehow, a secret society. It's a satisfying puzzle and the book stands on its own just fine, but the gift in Finch's books is following his characters as they evolve over the course of the series.

"Hidden" picks up after the 14th book, "An Extravagant Death," with Lenox recovering from injuries he sustained in that America-set mystery ("Hidden" hints he may be about to cross the Atlantic again). Lenox's relationship with his wife, Lady Jane, is particularly fascinating, since he's ambivalent about her passionate campaign for suffrage. How they navigate that disagreement and how it's viewed by high society would make for an entertaining book, even if there were no mystery.



St. Martin's Publishing Group / TNS



Penzler Publishers / TNS

A potential love interest for Dr. Watson is the suffragist in "Real Thing," in which Meyer grapples with issues of authenticity. When Holmes and Watson search for a missing painter, they encounter a secret world of forgers who alter existing paintings to personalize them for customers.

There are fascinating parallels to today in that mystery, with artificial intelligence blurring the lines between fakes and "real things," and Meyer writes with wit and a flair for bringing the Victorian era to life as his characters, for instance, take in an Oscar Wilde play (Finch's characters debate Charles Dickens' impact on British holidays).

Some will say Meyer has a lot of nerve creating new Holmes mysteries (he claims to be the editor of newly discovered manuscripts, but he wrote them). But Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's mysteries are still in print if you want to dive into them. If you're done with them and looking for more of the same, Meyer and Finch have good news for you: The game's (still) afoot.

AUTOMOTIVE

NEW AUTO METAL, CIRCA 2026:

The golden age of muscle revisited

By HENRY PAYNE
The Detroit News (TNS)

The new year promises an array of new vehicles, beginning with the 2026 Detroit Auto Show that opens Wednesday with a roar.

Literally.

Unshackled by government carbon dioxide regulations, expect the roar of new gas-powered V-8 engines to shake Motown asphalt. Ram's reborn earth-pawing, 777-horsepower Ram 1500 TRX supertruck debuted on Jan. 1 and is expected at the show, while Ford might take the wraps off a successor to the 700-horsepower Mustang Shelby GT500.

Though the electric revolution appears to be a niche movement, brands – particularly of the luxury variety – will continue to flood the streets with new battery-powered vehicles. Expect familiar gas-powered badges like Toyota RAV4, Jeep Cherokee and Kia Telluride, while old favorites like Subaru STI and Toyota MR2 are reborn.

Here is what to look for in 2026:

V-8 revival

RAM 1500 TRX: The beast is back. A victim of government regulations squeezing Stellantis V-8s in 2024, the TRX (aka T-Rex) returns as Ram's apex predator starting at $102,590, cheaper than its primary competitor, the $113,525, V8-powered Ford F-150 Raptor R. Upping its game, Rex also eclipses the 720-horse Raptor as the most powerful gas-powered truck. The Ram pumps out 777 horsepower from its supercharged 6.2-liter mill. When it goes on sales late this year, it will be armed for off-road battle with 35-inch all-terrain tires and a fortified frame while pampering passengers with a leather-wrapped interior.

FORD MUSTANG COBRA OR BOSS: Ford has used the Detroit Auto Show for big Mustang announcements in recent years (the seventh-gen Mustang and Mustang Dark Horse in '22, the RTR in '25), and this year promises more surprises.

Expect a new V8-powered monster that slots in above the $60,865, 500-horsepower Dark Horse and the GT3-race-car-inspired, $330K 815-horse Mustang GTD.

Mustang has filled this space in the past with the track-focused Shelby GT500 and GT350 models, but rumors are this gen won't be named Shelby. Perhaps it will carry the Boss badge (last seen in 2012) while still sporting the GT500's (last sold in 2022) supercharged 5.2-liter V-8.

DODGE CHARGER V-8: Hold your horses there, Mustang. Adding beef to the muscle-car segment, Dodge brings back its popular Hemi V-8 engine for the Charger coupe and sedan models.

Dodge faithful did not warm to the all-electric Charger Daytona, and the brand quickly followed with a 550-horse inline-6-cylinder Scat Pak engine that makes more horsepower than the ol' V-8. But Motown muscle is synonymous with eight-holers, and expect Dodge to stuff the flexible STLA Large platform with a V-8 making even more power paired with standard all-wheel-drive and a stiffened chassis. With Chevrolet's Camaro out of the picture, Charger vs. Mustang is a two-pony race.

CHEVY CORVETTE ZR1X: Chevy is flexing its V-8 muscle in Corvettes these days. For '26, we get the ZR1X, the range-topping model of the mid-engine, eighth-gen Corvette. With a jaw-dropping 1,250-horsepower, ZR1X (X for AWD) eclipses its rear-wheel-drive ZR1 supercar stablemate as an electrified hypercar taking on hyper-expensive exotics like the 1,184-horsepower Ferrari F80 and 1,049-horse Mercedes AMG One.

For just $207,395, ZR1X achieves hypercar status with a Frankenstein monster's mash of its sibling ZR1, Z06 and E-Ray powertrains.

ZR1X straps on ZR1's twin-turbos to the Z06's 5.5-liter V-8 engine, then adds E-Ray's (the first AWD Corvette with hybrid-electric power) front electric motor. With its luxurious, state-of-the-art digital interior and golf bag-friendly trunk, X is an all-season 233-mph hypercar.

GR GT: Toyota enters the muscle-car game. The halo of Toyota's GR performance brand, the GT3-race-car-based GR GT goes head-to-head with the $300K Mustang GTD in price and powertrain with a 641-horse, hybrid-electric, twin-turbocharged 4.0-liter V-8.

Sports cars, SUVs and Subies

RAM 2500 POWER WAGON: While electric trucks like the Ram REV and Ford F-150 Lightning have been canceled or retired, Ram is adding a diesel-powered version of its off-road-focused, heavy-duty Power Wagon to complement the light-duty TRX. The 6.7-liter Cummins turbo-diesel 6-banger boasts a mighty 1,075 pound-feet of torque and nearly 20,000 pounds of towing capability.

FORD MUSTANG RTR: Mustangs with V-8s can't have all the fun. The turbo-4-powered RTR enters production with 315 horsepower and an aftermarket dealer upgrade to 350. The product of Ford's partnership with drifting champ Vaughn Gittin Jr.'s RTR (Ready to Rock) shop in Charlotte, RTR comes with a drift brake and suspension bits from big brother Dark Horse. You'll know it by RTR's signature lit front grille nostrils.

FORD EXPLORER TREMOR: Detroiters will get their first look at the 2026 auto show at the off-road-focused Explorer Tremor. A rugged version of Ford's popular three-row family SUV, the Tremor takes the family beyond where the asphalt ends with extra ride height, skid plates, advanced rear axle, all-terrain tires and a 400-horse V-6 engine. You'll know it by its "Electric Spice" orange accents.

SUBARU WRX STI: V-8 engines weren't the only victims of the emissions Fun Police. Subaru dropped its legendary turbo-4-powered STI halo from its U.S. lineup due to the threat of government fines. But with a new sheriff in Washington, expect the Impreza-based STI's return. Subie teased a very production-ready looking STI at the Japan Auto Show last fall complete with Sopwith Camel-sized rear wing, swollen fenders and remade grille.

TOYOTA MR2: Toyota Chairman Akio Toyoda is determined (see that GR V-8) to remake Toyota as a fun brand, and what better way to communicate that vibe with the return of the mid-engine MR2 sports car last seen in 2007? With Supra exiting the lineup, the MR2 would seem to fit between the entry-level GR86 sports car and GR GT. Expect an exterior modeled on the 2023 Japan Auto Show's FT-Se concept and a ferocious turbo-3 engine from the GR Corolla hellion.

TOYOTA RAV4: The best-selling non-pickup truck in America gets remade with more Prius-like styling and an all-hybrid engine lineup. Starting at just over $33K with a host of standard features, the vehicle will offer trims exceeding $50K with – you guessed it – a performance-inspired GR Sport plug-in with 324 ponies and 50-mile electric driving range.

JEEP CHEROKEE: Cast aside in Jeep's rush to pricey electrics, Cherokee is back in the volume compact SUV segment. It'll take on segment best-sellers like the RAV4 and Honda CR-V by matching their hybrid powertrains, while standing apart with signature Jeep features like bold styling and standard AWD.

KIA K4 HATCHBACK: Kia remade its Forte sedan for 2025 with premium, Cadillac-like exterior styling and hoodless screens. It flew off the shelves. To keep cash registers ringing, the K4 Hatchback brings utility.

KIA TELLURIDE: The Korean automaker also has a hit on its hands with the stylish, affordable three-row SUV launched in 2020, and the 2027 model year marks its second act. In keeping with the industry's hybrid trend, Telluride's V-6 engine has been shelved for turbo-4 and hybrid-electric 4 models. The sharp-edged exterior mirrors electric sibling EV9 while the interior advances Kia's premium vibe.

VOLKSWAGEN ATLAS: Eyeing an all-EV future, VW made major investments in its ID.4 and ID. Buzz electric vehicles, but disappointing sales (the Buzz won't even be offered in the United States in 2026) mean the popular Tennessee-made, gas-powered Atlas family ute is more important than ever to the brand's bottom line. A redesigned second-gen Atlas hits the market in late 2026.

MAZDA CX-5: The best-handling compact ute this side of a BMW X3, CX-5 turns its attention to a major interior makeover. Gone is the remote dial-controlled dash screen – replaced by a big Tesla-like touchscreen and voice commands.

AUDI Q3/Q7: The German luxury brand will remake its SUV bookends – the wee Q3 compact and the big three-row Q7. The Q3 follows the new-in-2025 Q5 with updated styling, particularly in the interior with a sprawling mono-dash screen. It reportedly leans into its sports vibe with only a turbocharged S-line on offer.

MERCEDES-BENZ: Expect more EVs, including a battery-powered version of its compact GLC crossover and the first battery-powered AMG performance model, the AMG GT. The latter should pack over 1,000 horsepower.

PORSCHE 911 TURBO S: The supercar's range-topping Turbo model gains the T-Hybrid technology first seen on the Carrera GTS in 2025. With two turbochargers strapped to its back, expect the Porsche to register obscene horsepower numbers.

BMW 3-SERIES: Speaking of Bimmer, the brand's 3-series icon has been rebirthed with gas and electric variants. Based on the Vision Neue Klasse concept unveiled in Munich in 2023, the next-gen sports sedan gains a retro-BMW 2002 wardrobe with state-of-the-art electronics. The electric i3 will ride on a new EV platform with a potent, quad-motor iM3 performance model to follow.

Electric vehicles

BMW IX3: The Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas shares the stage with Detroit as the season's first auto-palooza, and BMW was the headliner with its electric iX3. The SUV showcases BMW's new AI-powered so-called "Intelligent Personal Assistant." BMW's "Symbiotic Drive" is a hands-free driving system that plays catch-up to Tesla's FSD, GM's SuperCruise and Ford's Blue Cruise.

JEEP RECON EV: Jeep has offered plug-in versions for silent off-roading, but the $69,585 Recon is its first trail-rated all-electric offering. An EV sibling to the iconic Wrangler, complete with removable doors, Recon packs 650 horsepower, but its estimated 250 miles of driving range may be limiting for adventure seekers.

TESLA CYBERCAB: Tesla went hard into the self-driving ride-share market in 2025, beginning with Austin, Texas. The Texas-based EV automaker is expected to increase the momentum in 2026 with April production of its sci-fi, self-driving robocab with scissor doors, no steering controls and two seats for fleet use only.

GENESIS GV90: Based on the Neolum Concept unsheathed at the 2024 New York Auto Show, GV90 is a big, fast, ultra-luxurious three-row electric SUV with a similarly high six-figure price.

CHEVY BOLT: Bolt is back for its second generation as the entry-level offering to the brand's EV lineup that includes the Equinox EV and Blazer EV. Based on the same bones as the first-gen model, the wee $28,995 Bolt gets considerable upgrades to charging (NACS port), battery (lithium-iron-phosphate) and refill speed (150 kWh) to complement its 255-mile range.

SUBARU UNCHARTED: Subaru's subcompact electric alternative to its popular Crosstrek gas SUV will list for $10K more, with 60 percent of the petrol car's range. The Subie takes on entry-level EV rivals like the Bolt, Hyundai Kona Electric, Kia Niro EV and Nissan Leaf.

MITSUBISHI EV: Speaking of Leaf, the Japanese brand follows its partner, Nissan, with an affordable subcompact SUV based on the Leaf that debuted in 2025 to huzzahs for its less-nerdy design.

ACURA RSX EV: The premium RSX is the first product on Honda's homespun EV architecture that also undergirds its forthcoming 0 Series EV models. RSX will be made at Honda's new EV Hub in Marysville, Ohio.

HONDA 0 SERIES SUV: Following a near-production reveal at the Tokyo Auto Show in November, Honda will release its Ohio-made 0 Series SUV that looks like something out of a sci-fi "Blade Runner" movie.

FERRARI ELETTRICA: The electric counterpart to the Italian stallion's first SUV, the V12-powered $435K Purosangue Electricca is the brand's first EV. Expect it to pack four people and plenty of punch.

Startups

AFEELA 1: Made on the same frame as the Acura RSX and Honda 0 Series in Ohio, the Afeela is the first vehicle from the Sony electronic brand, and is expected to be a rolling showcase of digital tech.

RIVIAN R2: The compact Rivian was first seen at last year's Detroit Auto Show and is the entry SUV to the EV startup's mid-size R1T pickup and R1S SUV lineup. Taking on Tesla's Model Y, R2 dresses up with Rivian's familiar vertical headlight and big interior screen.

SLATE EV PICKUP: Backed by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, Slate is a no-frills, customizable, two-passenger trucklet. Powered by a single electric motor, Slate comes standard with steel wheels, roll-up widows and a five-passenger SUV conversion kit.

POLESTAR 5: Volvo's Tesla-fighting EV brand brings to market its fifth model, the aptly named 5. The low-slung flagship sedan harbors 748 horsepower, with a performance model turning it up to 884.

JAGUAR I-TYPE: Though the legendary Brit brand has been making passenger cars since 1935, its radical shift to an upmarket EV brand is a historic reboot. Based on the Type 00 Concept, the I-Type has Bentley proportions, a $200K starting price and up to nearly 1,000 horsepower.

Henry Payne is auto critic for The Detroit News.

TOP: The 2026 Kia K4 Hatchback.
MIDDLE: The 2027 BMW iX3 EV.
BOTTOM: The 2027 Acura RSX.
Photos by Henry Payne/The Detroit News/TNS

AUTO REVIEWS

2026 Mazda CX-30: So good, it couldn't have been designed any other way

By LARRY PRINTZ
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Mazda / TNS

When it comes to the current state of automotive evolution, we live in an era when SUVs reproduce like rabbits with financing. Into this overcrowded habitat steps the 2026 Mazda CX-30, showing up like a car that was raised to write thank-you notes. It makes a sincere effort to be interesting, mildly mischievous, and never the reason you stare intently at your phone and power-walk past it in the parking lot.

The 2026 Mazda CX-30's design retains its mildly doughy charm that doesn't try desperately to pretend it's going to Moab. It knows it's going to the office, the grocery store, and somewhere mildly scenic where the parking lot is gravel. The front end avoids the now-common automotive scowl. It doesn't leer. It doesn't threaten. It simply looks forward, which is more than can be said for many competitors that appear permanently angry about their monthly payments. There's plastic cladding because, like too many fashion victims, apparently all SUVs must wear hiking boots even if they never leave asphalt.

Inside, the CX-30 feels expensive without insisting it's luxurious. With the exception of the mouse-fur trim on the instrument panel, the materials are well-chosen, the layout makes sense, and nothing looks like it was borrowed from Fisher-Price. The cabin is restrained, with Mazda resisting the urge to turn the interior into a glowing tablet. There are knobs, real ones, including one that operates the infotainment system, which is politely out of the way like a butler who knows when to keep quiet. It works well enough, but let's be honest: most people will gripe about twisting a rotary knob in 2026, while longing for the instant gratification of a touchscreen. The trade-off is you never have to wipe off a smudge-covered screen, which is more than some premium cars manage.

The seats are firm and supportive without pretending to be punishing racing buckets. You can drive the CX-30 for hours without developing opinions about chiropractors. The cabin is intimate in the way a well-cut jacket is intimate. But there's no denying that legroom – especially in the rear – is severely rationed. Cargo space feels more theoretical than real. The quoted 20 cubic feet seem optimistic, until you remember that optimism always comes standard. Yes, it stretches to 45 cubic feet with the seats down, but even then, this is modest. But the reward comes once you take the driver's seat.

The CX-30's 2.5-liter engine produces its 186 horsepower without fireworks, smoke machines, or a marketing intern shouting in your ear. It bolts to a six-speed automatic transmission that changes gears calmly, decisively, and without the nervous flailing common to transmissions that seem convinced you're about to enter Le Mans every time you touch the throttle. For drivers for whom more is never enough, Mazda offers a turbocharged version of the same engine with a persuasive 250 horsepower. That's enough to remind you that Mazda still knows how to have fun without requiring a disclaimer.

Unlike certain competitors who treat all-wheel drive like a secret VIP lounge accessible only with a credit card, Mazda just hands it to you standard. Underneath, the CX-30 is refreshingly ordinary: MacPherson struts up front, a humble beam axle out back. Sensible. Almost suspiciously so. And yet, the CX-30 moves with a grace that belies its spreadsheet-friendly engineering, being agile without over-caffeination, lively without strutting, and steered by a column that actually communicates.

When the road bends, the CX-30 is alert, cooperative and happy to play along. On the highway it behaves like a civilized adult with a pension plan. This is unmistakably a driver's car; albeit one that's been raised 8 inches off the ground to accommodate potholes, snowstorms and the occasional reminder that the real world is not a racetrack. The CX-30 rides well. Not floaty. Not stiff. Just right. It absorbs bad pavement without drama and remains composed when the road gets interesting. The car feels cohesive, as if all its parts were designed to work together rather than compete for attention.

Any gripes? Just one, and it's the kind accountants notice before drivers do: fuel economy. The EPA claims a respectable 27 mpg combined, which is fine in the same way airline food is theoretically edible. In real-world city driving, it returned a thirstier 18 mpg, improving to about 24 mpg on the highway once things settled down. Thankfully, the CX-30 drinking habits are bottom shelf, as it drinks regular unleaded.

The best cars don't scream for attention. They just do their job so well that you wonder how anything else ever got made. The 2026 Mazda CX-30 is like that. It's not revolutionary. It doesn't chase trends or invent new categories or try to convince you it's important. Instead, it respects the driver, respects the road and doesn't insult you with false bravado. The CX-30 feels inevitable, like it was always meant to exist this way, and that kind of quiet competence is oddly satisfying. Is it perfect? No. But then again, neither are you, me or anyone else brave enough to spend $32,525 on a car and pretend it's an adventure.

Larry Printz is an automotive journalist based in South Florida.

2026 Mazda CX-30 2.5 S Carbon Edition

Base price: $32,525
Engine: 2.5-liter four-cylinder
Horsepower/Torque: 186/186 pound-feet
EPA rating (combined city/highway): 27 mpg
Fuel required: Regular
Length/Width/Height: 173/71/62 inches
Ground clearance: 8 inches
Payload: 985 pounds
Cargo capacity: 20-45 cubic feet
Towing capacity: Not recommended

Chrysler Pacifica minivan is super cool – no kidding

By HENRY PAYNE
The Detroit News (TNS)

You think minivans are uncool?

I emerged from a game of Padel into a black Michigan night. With my arms full of a tennis bag and water bottle, I walked up to my red 2026 Chrysler Pacifica minivan tester and swung my foot under the rear door.

Open sesame!

The door automatically slid sideways, exposing the cavernous interior. I deposited my bag, then shut the door behind me with the push of a button on the B-pillar. Then I strolled around back where I had kept my laptop bag secured and did the same with the rear hatch.

Open sesame!

The motion sensor read my foot and rose automatically. You think minivans are uncool?

Pacifica will be one of the most mobbed vehicles at the Detroit Auto Show from Jan. 17-25 as families ogle its multiverse of features. But wait, there's more.

The futuristic rear end of my Pacifica tester looked like it was penned by Disney's monorail designers. Dark glass – uninterrupted by body-colored pillars – swept rearward, meeting a dark, pod-shaped rear window underlined by a single horizontal LED light. You'd think it rolled off a "Tron" movie set, if I didn't know it had been designed by Jewish émigré Irina Zavatski, who fled religious persecution in her native, civil war-ravaged Tajikistan in 1994 and got a design degree from the Cleveland Institute of Art.

"I was just 15 when we came to the United States," Zavatski told me back in 2016. "My mom explained to me she wanted a better future for her children."

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to design American minivans. Cool.

At 10 years old, Pacifica is relatively long in the tooth by industry standards. The posh, spanking new $120K 2026 Lucid Gravity SUV I reviewed last week has received raves for its design, securing a nomination for North American Utility of the Year (I'm a juror) for the 2026 model year. It looks a lot like a Pacifica from the rear – for twice the price of my Pinnacle tester. Swap the Chrysler's 20-inch wheels for the Gravity's stylish 21s, and it would be hard to tell the difference.

I slipped into Pacifica's front seat and connected my smartphone via Android Auto.

Voila!

My phone took over the screen.

"Hey, Google. Navigate to work," I said and Google instantly routed me from Sterling Heights to The Detroit News address that I had pre-programmed in Google Maps. I punched SETTINGS and changed the map to SATELLITE VIEW to better see the landscape around me at night.

A dazzling bird's-eye of my route appeared with meticulous detail of buildings, trees, parks, interstate.

One of the advantages of being 10 years old is that the Pacifica, unlike many three-row SUVs under pressure from federal nannies, hasn't ditched its throaty V-6 engine.

GRRRRRR! roared all 287 horses as I nailed the right pedal onto I-696. As I came down the on-ramp, an SUV decided "to be that guy." The driver accelerated on my right to stay alongside and prevent me from merging into traffic. GRRRROWL! I summoned the V-6's 220 cubic inches of piston and accelerated past him. Stud.

Think minivans are uncool? Cargo hauling is the three-row Pacifica's sweet spot. Need to haul five basketball players to a game? The Chrysler's three rows comfortably fit six. Hauling a lot of luggage to the airport? The third row stows in the floor. Need to haul long toboggans to the local sledding hill? The second row also stows in the floor so two kids can sit on the left part of the third row, and you can throw the sleds down the right side.

All second- and third-row seats stow in the floor, even with all-wheel drive for woolly Michigan winters. My friend Tom stows all the seats to bring home plywood sheets for home projects, then takes his wife and three kids to Massachusetts every summer. When they get there, he stows all the seats and cleans out the kid debris with the vacuum hose.

Yes, the Pacifica options a vacuum hose in the left C-pillar that can reach every corner of the cabin.

I took my tester on a 100-mile road trip to Richmond and Memphis in St. Clair County (who knew Richmond and Memphis were in Michigan?) to pick up big bags of the Midwest's best popcorn at a Sunrise Convenience Store.

While there, I had to check email/work on my laptop. Strangely, the top-drawer $60K Pinnacle trim does not offer Stow 'n' Go seating for the second row (though you can still remove second-row seats). I flattened the second-row seat and used it as an ottoman from the third row. I worked under the panoramic sunroof while downing an Arizona tea and popcorn.

Oops, my bag of popcorn spilled. I reached over, pulled out the vacuum hose and – ZOT! – sucked it up. Had my laptop battery waned, I could have plugged it into the 110-volt plug in the right C-pillar.

Cool.

Speaking of charging, Pacifica's' thirsty V-6 got about 374 miles of range (17 mpg) under my lead foot, which is about 100 more than the top-trim $77K electric, all-wheel-drive three-row Kia EV9 that I road-tripped to northern Michigan two winters ago. The Kia EV9 required 90 minutes of charging to go 215 miles to Gaylord, Michigan in cold temps.

I filled the Pacifica in Memphis in five minutes. Cool.

Could the Chrysler be cooler? Of course. I have a list.

Pacifica's rear may be sci-fi but its front end is stuck in the early 2000s, with a fascia off a Chrysler Sebring. A thinner, more horizontal front light and grille – similar to the Gravity – would wow minivan-averse moms (like Mrs. Payne).

The minivan's aging platform shows in an outdated instrument display that features an antiquated round tachometer. Modern digital displays make better use of the space. It's hard to be mad, though, as ergonomics are superb. Steering wheel controls include volume and radio buttons on the back side so you don't need to remove your hands to adjust a console knob. If you do, the volume knob is smaller than the automatic transmission shift knob so you don't get them confused (unlike, say, a Genesis GV80).

And I would have liked to eat my Popeye's chicken on I-75 north to Memphis (that still sounds weird) hands-free. Yes, I'm spoiled by hands-free systems from GM, Ford and Tesla. But that's the standard today. Heck, I can drive hands-free in the three-row, $52K Chevy Traverse. In the digital age, Pacifica's adaptive cruise control is soooo 15 minutes ago.

Which designers no doubt will address when Pacifica gets its next-gen upgrade 'round 2028. Until then, however, this minivan is one of the coolest cars in show.

Henry Payne is auto critic for The Detroit News.

Henry Payne / The Detroit News / TNS

2026 Chrysler Pacifica

★★★★

Vehicle type: Front- and all-wheel drive, five-door, seven-passenger minivan
Price: $45,940, including $1,995 destination charge ($57,590 Pinnacle as tested)
Powerplant: 3.6-liter V-6
Power: 287 horsepower, 262 pound-feet of torque
Transmission: Nine-speed automatic
Performance: 0-60 mph, 7.8 seconds (Car and Driver); towing, 3,600 pounds
Weight: 5,064 pounds (as tested)
Fuel economy: EPA 17 mpg city/25 highway/25 combined (AWD)

Report card

Highs: Swiss Army knife features; three-row utility
Lows: Dated fascia; no hands-free driving option for long trips

TECHNOLOGY

GADGETS

Soundbar for the win!

By GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

In a matter of minutes, the whole atmosphere for my Sunday afternoon football watching turned for the better. That's what I got with the OXS SoundBar S21 sound system. And I'll add a line I say often about soundbars: It is one of the most underrated accessories. Once you get one, you'll understand.

The AC-powered **OXS S21 2.1 Channel Soundbar** features two 9731 Racetrack full-range drivers and a wired subwoofer with a 5.25-inch BassMax woofer inside. Combined, they bring 240W of powerful, precision-tuned audio. Instantly, audio from any TV show, movie, sporting event or game is enhanced to deliver crystal-clear sound with the right amount of bass.

Setup is essentially plug-and-play. The ultra-slim and compact soundbar (15.75 by 1.65 by 3.46 inches) features a mesh front with volume-level lights. Input ports are on the back and include HDMI (TV ARC), optical, USB-A, and a 3.5 mm auxiliary jack. For wall mounting, an HDMI right-angle adapter is included. If your TV supports Bluetooth (V5.3), that's an option for a wireless connection.

Along with the improved sound quality, the volume is significantly louder, reaching 90 dB. There are three modes, with my choice of Movie Mode to enhance dialogue clarity. The Game Mode will give you directional audio for a competitive advantage. And the Music Mode balances mids and highs for vibrant, crystal-clear playback.

Wall mount the soundbar right under the TV for space saving, or have it sit right under the TV on a shelf or any flat surface – it's your choice. The wired subwoofer (4.53 by 11.42 by 9.84 inches) connects to the soundbar and can sit below or off to the side.

A power adapter, remote control and connection cables are included.

https://oxsaudio.com/en-uk/products/oxs-s21-2-1ch-soundbar-with-subwoofer, $159.99

The OXS S21 2.1 Channel Soundbar features two 9731 Racetrack full-range drivers and a wired subwoofer with a 5.25-inch BassMax woofer inside.
OXS / TNS

OpenRock's new **Link 20 open-ear hybrid headset** has a big advantage over competitors thanks to its first-of-its-kind magnetic, detachable, interchangeable boom mic. As the press release introducing the headset stated, it is designed to merge professional-grade communication with lifestyle convenience. With its magnetic design, you can put it on or take it off instantly.

The 2.79-inch boom mic features a 5-mic array with custom-tuned AI ENC technology for crystal-clear communication.

Each lightweight, open-ear-designed earbud can hold the boom mic for flexibility. They are constructed with N54 magnets protected by MagShield FusionTech and a six-layer noble-metal plating, enabling them to withstand over 10,000 attach-detach cycles.

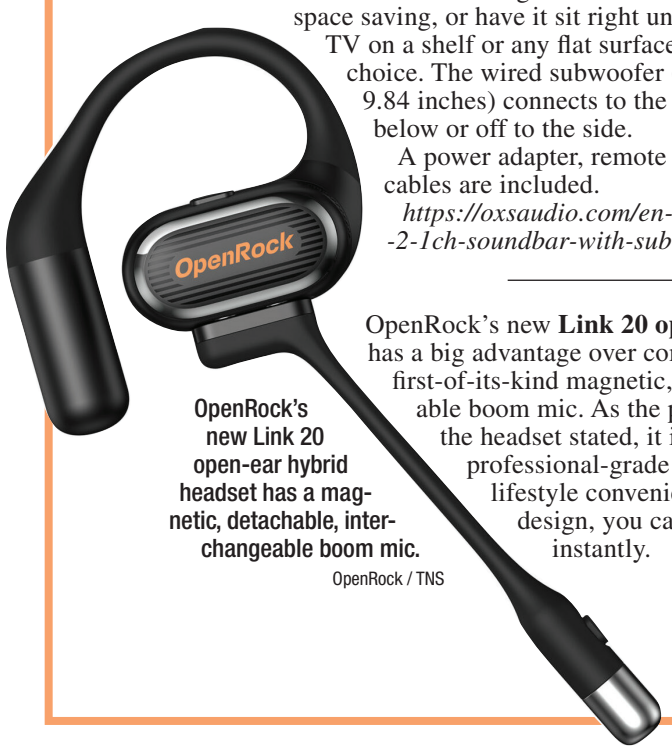
As for the sound performance, they are great. Each ear has a powerful 30 mW speaker to deliver clear, crisp sound.

For comfort, they feature a 6.9-degree ergonomic tilt that supports all-day use. With Bluetooth 6.0 dual-device connectivity, multiple sources can be connected.

The earbuds are IPX7 sweat- and dust-resistant, and the magnetic mic is IP55-rated. The OpenRock companion app will assist in customization, including three dedicated sound modes (entertainment, sport, and meeting).

And if all that is not impressive enough, how about up to 52 hours of battery life with the included charging/storage case. The storage case has a "find device" feature that broadcasts a sound to help locate the Link 20s if they are misplaced.

https://link20.openrock.com, $149.99



OpenRock's new Link 20 open-ear hybrid headset has a magnetic, detachable, interchangeable boom mic.
OpenRock / TNS

Contact Gregg Ellman at greggellman@mac.com. Follow him on Twitter @gregg ellman.

A little planning will make things easier after you're gone

By JIM ROSSMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

If your family is like mine, one person is likely in charge of doing the finances and paying the bills and because so much of our financial dealings happen online, that task will usually fall to one person.

If you happen to be that person for your family, have you thought about what kind of information your family would need to move forward if something were to suddenly happen to you?

If you got hit by a bus tomorrow, would the bills get paid? Would your family know how to access your bank accounts, insurance or even your retirement accounts?

I'm sure you're doing a good job keeping your finances in shape, but if you were gone, can your family even get into your phone or computer? Could they log into your email account?

Years ago, when I traveled a lot for work, I realized so much of our finances happened online that it would not be very easy for my wife to figure it all out without specific instructions – so I created a document called "the bill situation."

I wanted my wife to have a list of all our monthly bills, the account numbers, website addresses and login information for each site, and to know how each of those bills got paid.

All of our monthly bills get paid automatically, and I wanted her to know how to see all that for herself.

I didn't stop there.

The list grew to include our insurance information for both health insurance and car/home insurance along with how those get paid.

Then I covered the banking situation and listed our checking and savings accounts, including how to access them online.

I also included how to access our retirement accounts, including the login for the website and phone numbers for our financial adviser.

When I was compiling this list, I took the time to log into each website and make sure the password still worked. I also verified beneficiary information on the appropriate accounts.

I listed accounts like our streaming TV services and our cell phones as well as credit cards, including balance information and how the payments for all those accounts were set up.

Don't forget about legal documents like car titles and mortgage documents.

This isn't rocket science. Most of us could get this information together in a day or two.

If you're needing a reminder, take a look back through a few months' checking account transactions to see what is getting paid each month.

Last Modified
Encrypt Document
?
X
Encrypt the contents of this file
Password:
Caution: If you lose or forget the password, it cannot be recovered. It is advisable to keep a list of passwords and their corresponding document names in a safe place.
(Remember that passwords are case-sensitive.)
OK
Cancel

Jim Rossman / TNS
Encryption options on a Microsoft Word document.

You should keep this information in a place that will be easy for your family to access, which might be a safe deposit box or secure place in your home.

This is your most important and sensitive personal information, and you want to do everything you can to keep it safe, while making sure those who need it can get to it when the time comes.

If you aren't married, you might want to provide this type of information for your children or the executor of your estate. Leaving a copy of the file with your lawyer/estate planner is not a bad idea if you don't have family close by.

If you elect to keep this information electronically, please consider carefully where you'll store it and make sure it is somewhere that's password protected.

My wife reminded me recently that I should revisit and update our information, and that's now at the top of my list.

Jim Rossman is a tech columnist for Tribune News Service. He may be reached at jrossmantechadviser @gmail.com.

Could ChatGPT convince you to buy something?

Threat of manipulation looms as AI companies gear up to sell ads

By BRUCE SCHNEIER and NATHAN SANDERS
Harvard University
(The Conversation)

Eighteen months ago, it was plausible that artificial intelligence might take a different path than social media. Back then, AI's development hadn't consolidated under a small number of big tech firms. Nor had it capitalized on consumer attention, surveilling users and delivering ads.

Unfortunately, the AI industry is now taking a page from the social media playbook and has set its sights on monetizing consumer attention. When OpenAI launched its ChatGPT Search feature in late 2024 and its browser, ChatGPT Atlas, in October 2025, it kicked off a race to capture online behavioral data to power advertising. It's part of a yearslong turnabout by OpenAI, whose CEO Sam Altman once called the combination of ads and AI "unsettling" and now promises that ads can be deployed in AI apps while preserving trust. The rampant speculation among OpenAI users who believe they see paid placements in ChatGPT responses suggests they are not convinced.

In 2024, AI search company Perplexity started experimenting with ads in its offerings. A few months after that, Microsoft introduced ads to its Copilot AI. Google's AI Mode for search now increasingly features ads, as does Amazon's Rufus chatbot.

As a security expert and data scientist, we see these examples as harbingers of a future where AI companies profit from manipulating their users' behavior for the benefit of their advertisers and investors. It's also a reminder that time to steer the direction of AI development away from private exploitation and toward public benefit is quickly running out.

The functionality of ChatGPT Search and its Atlas browser is not really new. Meta, commercial AI competitor Perplexity and even ChatGPT itself have had similar AI search features for years, and both Google and Microsoft beat OpenAI to the punch by integrating AI with their browsers. But OpenAI's business positioning signals a shift.

We believe the ChatGPT Search and Atlas announcements are worrisome because there is really only one way to make money on search: the advertising model pioneered ruthlessly by Google.

Advertising model

Ruled a monopolist in U.S. federal court, Google has earned more than $1.6 trillion in advertising revenue since 2001. You may think of Google as a web search company, or a streaming video company (YouTube), or an email company (Gmail), or a mobile phone company (Android, Pixel), or maybe even an AI company (Gemini). But those products are ancillary to Google's bottom line. The advertising segment typically accounts for 80 percent to 90 percent of its total revenue. Everything else is there to collect users' data and direct users' attention to its advertising revenue stream.

After two decades in this monopoly position, Google's search product is much more tuned to the company's needs than those of its users. When Google Search first arrived decades ago, it was revelatory in its ability to instantly find useful information across the still-nascent web. In 2025, its search result pages are dominated by low-quality and often AI-generated content, spam sites that exist solely to drive traffic to Amazon sales – a tactic known as affiliate marketing – and paid ad placements, which at times are indistinguishable from organic results.

THE CONVERSATION

Plenty of advertisers and observers seem to think AI-powered advertising is the future of the ad business.

Highly persuasive

Paid advertising in AI search, and AI models generally, could look very different from traditional web search. It has the potential to influence your thinking, spending patterns and even personal beliefs in much more subtle ways. Because AI can engage in active dialogue, addressing your specific questions, concerns and ideas rather than just filtering static content, its potential for influence is much greater. It's like the difference between reading a textbook and having a conversation with its author.

Imagine you're conversing with your AI agent about an upcoming vacation. Did it recommend a particular airline or hotel chain because they really are best for you, or does the company get a kickback for every mention? If you ask about a political issue, does the model bias its answer based on which political party has paid the company a fee, or based on the bias of the model's corporate owners?

There is mounting evidence that AI models are at least as effective as people at persuading users to do things. A December 2023 meta-analysis of 121 randomized trials reported that AI models are as good as humans at shifting people's perceptions, attitudes and behaviors. A more recent meta-analysis of eight studies similarly concluded there was "no significant overall difference in persuasive performance between (large language models) and humans."

This influence may go well beyond shaping what products you buy or who you vote for. As with the field of search engine optimization, the incentive for humans to perform for AI models might shape the way people write and communicate with each other. How we express ourselves online is likely to be increasingly directed to win the attention of AIs and earn placement in the responses they return to users.

A different way forward

Much of this is discouraging, but there is much that can be done to change it.

First, it's important to recognize that today's AI is fundamentally untrustworthy, for the same reasons that search engines and social media platforms are.

The problem is not the technology itself; fast ways to find information and communicate with friends and family can be wonderful capabilities. The problem is the priorities of the corporations who own these platforms and for whose benefit they are operated. Recognize that you don't have control over what data is fed to the AI, who it is shared with and how it is used. It's important to keep that in mind when you connect devices and services to AI platforms, ask them questions, or consider buying or doing the things they suggest.

There is also a lot that people can demand of governments to restrain harmful corporate uses of AI. In the U.S., Congress could enshrine consumers' rights to control their own personal data, as the EU already has. It could also create a data protection enforcement agency, as essentially every other developed nation has.

Governments worldwide could invest in Public AI – models built by public agencies offered universally for public benefit and transparently under public oversight. They could also restrict how corporations can collude to exploit people using AI, for example by barring advertisements for dangerous products such as cigarettes and requiring disclosure of paid endorsements.

Every technology company seeks to differentiate itself from competitors, particularly in an era when yesterday's groundbreaking AI quickly becomes a commodity that will run on any kid's phone. One differentiator is in building a trustworthy service. It remains to be seen whether companies such as OpenAI and Anthropic can sustain profitable businesses on the back of subscription AI services like the premium editions of ChatGPT, Plus and Pro, and Claude Pro. If they are going to continue convincing consumers and businesses to pay for these premium services, they will need to build trust.

That will require making real commitments to consumers on transparency, privacy, reliability and security that are followed through consistently and verifiably.

And while no one knows what the future business models for AI will be, we can be certain that consumers do not want to be exploited by AI, secretly or otherwise.

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HOME & GARDEN

Tints, tones and shades of soft cream is used on prominent decor elements in this living space such as sofa, drapery and sideboard.

Handout / TNS

Layers of soft cream dominate this living space from the artwork to the upholstery creating a soothing, calm space that is light and bright.

Scott Gabriel Morris / TNS

DESIGN RECIPES

Tips for using the Color of the Year

By CATHY HOBBS
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Cloud Dancer offers broad buyer appeal, it photographs beautifully, feels move-in ready and allows buyers to easily imagine their own furnishings. Additionally, the color is a soothing, universal neutral that helps to provide a space with a sense of calm and serenity.

Looking for innovative and creative ways to use Pantone's 2026 Color of the Year, Cloud Dancer? Here are some top design recipes tips.

1. Consider using Cloud Dancer as a foundation color for your space. Foundation colors work best as a "visual anchor." An example would be to use Cloud Dancer as an all over wall color.

2. Look for ways to layer tints, tones and shades of color. As Cloud Dancer is neutral, it allows one to layer shades of color within a room.

3. Use Cloud Dancer as a color to highlight architectural details such as cabinetry, doors, door jambs, trims and windowsills.

4. Use Cloud Dancer for upholstery and textile elements such as a primary color for furnishings such as sofas, chairs and area rugs.

5. Utilize the color Cloud Dancer in areas that don't get much light. Lighter colors help to set a calm, soothing mood and ensure that a space is light and bright.

Cathy Hobbs is the owner of Cathy Hobbs Design Recipes, a home staging company based in New York City (www.cathyhobbs.com). She is also the owner of Highland Passive House, a Home Staging + Design Center based in New York's Hudson Valley (www.highlandpassivehouse.com). Cathy's practical, how-to design advice can also be found in her book, "Home Design Recipes."

Home decor resolutions

A new year is the perfect time to look at your home with fresh eyes. Rather than thinking in terms of major renovations or big-ticket purchases, consider small, intentional updates that can make a meaningful impact. These home decor resolutions focus on refreshing what you already have, editing with purpose, and creating spaces that feel both functional and elevated.

Donate. Instead of keeping items that may never be used again, donate them to a reuse center so that your gently used furniture can be someone else's treasure.

Repair and refresh. As so many projects are often delayed and put off, now is the perfect time to make necessary repairs.

Clean. From dusty shelves to cleaning areas that haven't been touched in months, take this time for to "deep clean" key areas.

Repaint and recalk. Low-cost refreshers such as painting and recaulking can go a long way to keeping a home fresh.

Reupholster a piece of furniture to convey a whole new look.

Upgrade or replace soft goods. Replace worn pillows, throws and bedding. Fresh textiles are one of the quickest ways to make a room feel new.

Install new lighting. Swap outdated table lamps, floor lamps or pendants for more modern fixtures.

Replace hardware. New cabinet pulls, door hardware or bathroom accessories are small purchases that deliver a big "wow" factor.

Make a statement. Adding or changing a statement piece can instantly transform a room. Some options include artwork, a sculptural chair or a bold mirror. A single focal point can elevate an entire space.

Choose quality over quantity. Rather than multiple decorative items, invest in fewer, well-made pieces that feel intentional and will stand the test of time.

– Cathy Hobbs

How can I refresh my home this time of year?

Angie Hicks
Ask Angi

After weeks of gift wrapping, light hanging and tree trimming, yelling "Happy New Year" marks the end of the holiday season. And now we're in that strange in-between stretch when your house suddenly looks a little bare.

But don't worry: This is prime time to reset your home for the winter months without losing the comfort, calm and coziness you worked so hard to build. In true new-year spirit, it's all about clearing the decks, refreshing the vibes and giving your home some thoughtful midwinter attention.

Streamline storage

If last-year-you left a pile of mangled garland and lights in a bin like a booby trap, this is your reset button. Take time now to store it right so you're not wrestling it next December. Wrap your string lights around a plastic reel so they don't fuse into a single knot. Store fragile ornaments in divided containers or individually wrapped to protect them from bumps and moisture. Use sturdy, sealable bins that keep out pests and humidity. Think of this as sending a care package to future you, which you'll appreciate when the next holiday season rolls back around.

Refresh the exterior

Even without the giant inflatable snowmen or a big holiday light display, your exterior can still feel friendly and wintry. Extend your indoor palette outdoors through porch décor, planters and subtle lighting. Use natural materials such as birchwood, pinecones, winter branches or touches of red berries. Neutral hues like white, gray and icy blue offer a calm, seasonal look that pairs well with snowy landscapes.

Deep clean trouble spots

Between the cookie crumbs, cocoa spills and muddy boots, the holidays leave their mark, especially if you hosted guests. Start the new year off clean by deep-washing carpets, steam-cleaning rugs and tending to upholstery. Kitchens and bathrooms deserve extra attention after heavy use, too. If there's a piece of furniture you've been meaning to refresh, repaint or reupholster, winter is a great time to make it a project. It's amazing how much a small upgrade can reset the feel of a room.

Dreamstime / TNS

Use sturdy, sealable bins that keep out pests and humidity.

Choose a winter palette

Just because the holiday décor is packed away doesn't mean your home can't stay warm, inviting and seasonal. Winter is a great time to play with soft, calming hues or bold, dramatic accents. Start by picking two or three colors you want to anchor the space. You can keep things neutral or add a vibrant accent shade that gives your room some personality. Popular winter color pairings include gray, pale blue and white; warm earth tones with gold; or deep purple and metallics. If you're unsure what direction to take, a professional interior decorator can help you sort through options before you make any purchases.

Light it up

Winter may slowly be crawling back toward longer days, but sunlight is still in short supply. Maximize natural light by using sheer curtains, keeping windows clean and adding reflective surfaces like mirrors or metallic accents. You can keep some of that holiday brightness alive with soft white string lights or winter-scented candles. And if you really want to brighten things up, consider repainting a room. A fresh wall color can completely shift the mood.

Sweep up

When the reindeer statues, stockings and candles come down, your house can suddenly feel strangely empty and reveal a season's worth of dust and pine needles. Use this lull to clean the areas your decor hid: bookshelves, windowsills, doorways and mantels. The more clutter you remove, the fewer places dust has to gather, so give the high-traffic and high-display spots a little extra attention. And if sweeping, vacuuming and wiping everything down feels overwhelming after a busy season, bring in a trusted local cleaning crew to help restore order.

Tweet your home care questions with #AskingAngi and we'll try to answer them in a future column.

West Palm Beach, Florida.
Sean Pavone / Dreamstime / TNS

Here are the 11 most exciting luxury hotels opening in 2026

By SARAH RAPPAPORT
Bloomberg News (TNS)

The definition of "luxury travel" is changing. As hotels by big-name interior designers with outposts of renowned restaurants get copy-pasted all around the world, they're coming off as overly predictable and even cookie-cutter. With demand at the top end of the luxury travel market higher than ever, hotels have to work harder to stand out. That means the most anticipated hotels for 2026 have one of two things in common: a true independent spirit or an ability to raise the bar in unquestionable ways.

Take Zannier Bendor, a 17-acre private island retreat in Provence owned by the French family behind Pernod Ricard. It will open its doors as a hotel this spring, creating a new destination off the glittering Mediterranean coastline with restaurants, shopping, diving and – in keeping with the family business – multiple bars. La Réserve, a French hotel brand with just four intimate European locations, is opening six apartments in a grand Florentine palazzo near the Ponte Vecchio, aiming to make guests feel like they have their own home in the heart of the historic city.

Big players like Aman aren't all out of tricks, however, and in fact such established brands are still the options consumers trust most when they're visiting a less familiar destination or planning a once-in-a-lifetime trip. The group's opening in Mexico will help cement the rise of the eastern cape of Baja California, about 90 minutes from Los Cabos. It's away from the thumping clubs on a less developed section of coastline that claims a rare amenity in this corner of Mexico: swimmable beaches. Meanwhile, Singita, the most renowned luxury safari camp operator in Africa, is finally planting its flag in one of the most desirable private concessions of Botswana's wildlife-rich Okavango Delta at the end of 2026, a dream combination for safari connoisseurs.

When big brands come to big markets, they have to pull out all the stops. So in London, Waldorf Astoria will transform the landmark Admiralty Arch into the latest jewel in its crown – just one year after wrapping a jaw-dropping $2 billion, eight-year renovation of its New York flagship. But even then it may not be the biggest opening in town. The smart money is on Cambridge House, a Georgian gem overlooking Green Park that's currently being converted by Auberge Collection. With so much early buzz, snagging a room the minute reservations open may be your best odds at getting in.

The Vineta Hotel

WHEN: January
WHERE: Palm Beach, Florida

Palm Beach has its fair share of luxury hotels. But the Vineta is the American debut from Oetker Hotels, the European group behind Parisian palace Le Bristol. It's a brand known for continental elegance, old-world glamour and impeccable service – qualities that aren't typically native to South Florida. Now it's setting up shop blocks away from the posh boutiques of Worth Avenue, in a Mediterranean-revival-style building that's been standing for a hundred years.

Its extensive renovation has made for 41 spacious suites, with bedrooms decorated in soft pastels to fit the building's heritage and pale-pink exterior. In a touch of whimsy, staffers will wheel bar carts around the hotel's public spaces. One is dedicated to Champagne and another to poolside scoops of gelato. A third will be stocked with Barbara Sturm beauty products, delivering creams and serums to guests' rooms so they can leave the hotel with not just a tan but also a radiant glow. Rooms from $1,497.

The Imperial Hotel

WHEN: March
WHERE: Kyoto, Japan

It's been three decades since homegrown Japanese luxury company Imperial opened a new property. That changes in spring 2026, with its update of a 90-year-old former theater in Kyoto's famed Gion district. The main building has been respectfully preserved, with elements from the former performance space, including its distinct pillars and window frames, retained as visual focal points. A guests-only rooftop bar offers sweeping views of the cityscape and the lanterns' glow on the streets below.

The Imperial's 55 rooms use traditional materials such as Japanese cedar columns and tatami flooring, with design by local firms rather than imported big names, as has become the norm in town. The result is something more subtle, and more faithfully and authentically Japanese than the area's shiny competition. From around $1,100.

Zannier Bendor

WHEN: Spring
WHERE: South of France

When French spirits entrepreneur Paul Ricard purchased Île de Bendor – off the coast of rosé capital Bandol – in the 1950s, it was just an empty plot. He transformed the stony island into a socialite playground where Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin and artist Salvador Dalí would visit. Now the Ricard family is turning its vacation home into a destination for modern luxury travelers. There will be a 93-room hotel but also a little village with three restaurants, four bars, an art gallery and artisan shops open to the public.

Days on the 17-acre island can be spent playing pétanque, relaxing at the 1,200-square-meter (12,900-square-foot) spa or scuba diving (the hotel will have a dive center run in partnership with the Cousteau family). A ten-minute ferry will take guests to the mainland to explore Provencal vineyards, cobblestone villages and the region's famed farmers markets. From around $600.

Amanvari

WHEN: Spring
WHERE: Baja California, Mexico

Ultraluxe Aman is making a splash with its first Mexican hotel, with 18 casitas on a hillside along the quiet east cape of Baja California. Because Aman loyalists are often somewhat reclusive, choosing to hide away in their posh digs, each casita will include expansive views of the Sea of Cortez and the Sierra de la Laguna mountains, plus private pools flanked with plush loungers. The spa, one of the highlights of any Aman resort, will feature a modern temescal (sweat lodge), in a nod to local traditions.

One of the benefits of being here versus bustling Cabo is that the beaches of the east cape are very swimmable, with less strong currents, ideal for days spent exploring the gentle waters. Nearby is a golf course designed by the renowned Robert Trent Jones II, as well as 18 acres of organic farms and orchards to explore. Rates not currently available.

The Red Palace

WHEN: Second quarter
WHERE: Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

The futuristic overwater bungalows in Saudi Arabia's glimmering new Red Sea development are getting fresh competition in an unlikely location: the busy, traffic-clogged capital. It's here that the kingdom's royal residence – built in 1943 as the home of the country's founding father, King Abdulaziz Al Saud, and famous for its art deco architecture – will open to the public as a 70-room hotel. Historic spaces that hosted royal celebrations and state banquets will become reception suites, each one scented with King Saud's favorite flower, the native Taif rose.

In another display of discretion, the spa is also made up exclusively of private suites, with each treatment room sporting its own changing area, sauna and steam room. And as part of the royal experience, guests will have palace hosts who cater to their every request, within reason. Rates not currently available.

The Cooper

WHEN: March
WHERE: Charleston, South Carolina

Charleston has long been beloved for its gracious Southern architecture, miles of white flowering magnolia trees and rich Lowcountry cuisine – but now it's one of the top 2026 destinations for the ways in which it keeps raising the bar. The Cooper, for instance, will be the first hotel in town to marry all the amenities of an urban resort with a waterfront location, making it feel almost like a beach retreat within the city itself.

Among its draws will be a 7,000-square-foot wellness center, five restaurants and a rooftop infinity pool, plus preferential access to a yearlong chef's residence by Daniel Humm (of Eleven Madison Park fame) at sibling hotel Charleston Place. And of course, seeing the city from the water will be a unique experience worth prioritizing too: Guests will have access to a private marina with cruising vessels to tour the shoreline, as well as a water taxi to Daniel Island. From $950.

Cambridge House, Auberge Collection

WHEN: Spring
WHERE: London

London's wildly competitive hotel market is getting a stellar new entrant, in a landmark building in Mayfair that was formerly home to a prince and a prime minister. The design of the 102 rooms and common spaces will channel the opulence of the Georgian era with intricate original ceiling designs, 19-foot-high ceilings and ornate fireplaces. They'll overlook King Charles III's current residence, with windows facing the greenery of the parks.

In keeping with its knack for decadent spas, Auberge is adding a wellness area inspired by ancient Roman bathhouses that's set to span two floors, including a pair of heated swimming pools – a rarity in central London – and a relaxation area with a firepit. A new Major Food Group restaurant might not be the deciding factor in a booking for New Yorkers, but it will likely make Cambridge House a hot spot for Londoners in a similar way the new Carbone at the Chancery Rosewood has elsewhere in Mayfair. Rates not yet available.

Four Seasons Cartagena

WHEN: May Where: Cartagena, Colombia

Cartagena's hotel scene – mostly composed of boutique spots in the new city, plus one stunning Sofitel behind the historic ramparts – is getting a big luxury upgrade this spring. Four Seasons, a brand still riding its White Lotus high, is taking over (and unifying) eight buildings including a 16th century San Franciscan temple and the 1920s Beaux Arts Club Cartagena, an old social hotbed. Inside will be 131 rooms and eight bars and restaurants, including a speakeasy and a steakhouse.

Guests can sign up for salsa lessons led by professional dancers, then cool down in one of the rooftop's two swimming pools. As for the rooms, they'll start at a spacious 388 square feet, many with balconies overlooking the old cloisters. Consider it the best of both worlds: old Colombian charm and all the modern creature comforts. Rooms from around $800.

La Réserve Firenze

WHEN: June
WHERE: Florence, Italy

La Réserve's first Italian hotel is located on the Via Santo Spirito, a street lined with Renaissance-era buildings and artisan workshops. It took a meticulous four-year renovation and a collaboration with celebrated designers Gilles & Boissier to transform the 600-year-old palazzo into a luxe hotel, but the result includes frescoed ceilings, ornate tilework, arched windows and the best of Italian craftsmanship, in a nod to the history and art-world heritage that defines Florence.

There are just six standalone apartments in one- to three-bedroom configurations. All have full kitchens and separate living areas, plus access to a gym, library and lounge. There's also a roof terrace where you can sip on the region's wines, as well as a "secret bar" to explore in the heritage building. Experiences will include Tuscan culinary adventures and the opportunity to play tennis at the owner's Florentine house, truly making guests feel at home on the city's storied streets. Rates not yet available.

The Malkai

WHEN: Fourth quarter
WHERE: Oman

Rather than a single hotel, this is a trio of ultraluxe lodges forming a circuit – giving guests an easy way to explore an entire country in the most streamlined and amenity-rich way possible. (We've noted these circuits as one of the most compelling trends in travel right now.) The Malkai will have one tented camp in the sweeping sands of Oman's desert and another in the coastal farmlands; the final lodge will be up in the jagged Al Hajar Mountains. The camps include spas and marble swimming pools in dramatic shades of dark red and beige. And unlike most hotels, these can't be booked individually. Instead itineraries spanning all three lodges will last 4 to 10 days.

In a unique twist, guests will get paired with a personal so-called murshid, a butler who doubles as a driver. They'll guide guests on every leg of their big Omani sojourn, shuttling them from lodge to lodge in Land Rover Defenders and arranging all sorts of adventures along the way, be it dune-bashing in the desert or snorkeling off Oman's coast. Rates not yet available.

Singita Elela

WHEN: December
WHERE: Botswana

Singita has made its reputation as the king of five-star safaris without a lodge in Botswana, one of Africa's most coveted destinations. So safari insiders are eager to see what the company can achieve now that it's planting its flag in the famed Okavango Delta, a region made up of wildlife-rich islands, lagoons, grasslands and swamps. The specific area Singita has taken on – the privately managed, 400,000-acre Abu concession, where Wilderness Safaris long ran the iconic Abu Camp – teems with herds of elephants, lions and cheetahs. And its topographical diversity lets guests appreciate the animals from many distinct vantages, including wooden mokoro canoes as well as traditional open-top jeeps, offering a wider range of wildlife adventures.

Each of the lodge's eight tents comes with its own private heated plunge pool, and there are ample outdoor decks to take in the clear skies. Expect a decadent level of luxury, even by the high standards that exist in the bush. As with most of Singita's latest projects, Elela will have reliable Wi-Fi, in-room wellness treatments and a deep wine cellar for evening tastings. Plus, design will be as bold as the predators in the savannah: Singita's aesthetic relies heavily on the works of top African artisans, including weavers, textilers and ceramicists who contribute to a colorful and local feel. All-inclusive rates from $4,500.

Myscha Theriault/TNS

Tiny art created while traveling is clipped to a gridwall panel for a minimalist, low-cost display.

Getting *crafty* on the *road*

Travel-friendly family projects

By MYSCHA THERIAULT
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Need a family-friendly art activity conducive to travel? Something you can enjoy, but will also keep the kids entertained during a visit with the grandparents? I've field tested the following ideas in a number of settings around the world, and with a wide range of ages to boot.

Bonus? These crafts can be cranked out even in the absence of a formal art supply store. That's right. Using only free items pulled from the recycling and inexpensive supplies from small discount stores, you can create mail art, impromptu party decorations, and more. Try these projects during your next family vacation.

Sculptures

If the word "sculpture" leaves you feeling overwhelmed with visions of wood-carving tools, messy clay, and the mayhem either could cause in the hands of younger artists on family holiday, be stressed no more. A phenomenally versatile supply exists right next to your toilet. Yup, those little cardboard tubes at the center of your bathroom tissue rolls are good for more than preschool puppet theater. While there is no shortage of repurposing ideas for these things, the one that really caught my eye this past year was mask sculptures. Some of the most inspirational ones out there were created by artist Junior Fritz Jacquet, whose finished faces have provided inspiration for a fair number of teachers, students, and art content creators.

The more complicated examples will require a fairly deep dive. However, there are simpler approaches which still look amazing, even for young beginners. A simple internet search and one of the empty roll tubes will get you started. From there, you can add embellishments as I did, or simply choose one basic pigment to layer over the cardboard. You can also use a piece of charcoal, or dark colored pastel to add more visual depth to the nooks and crannies.

The first time I tried one of these, I had difficulty with some of the tighter folds. During my practice session however, I noticed that after a few scrunches and squishes, I could manage a sculpted face which looked very much like an Easter Island statue or a Polynesian tiki carving. So that's the direction I took. Frankly, I had a ball. So did several of my friends and neighbors. After producing a few examples on the road, I brought the concept home and hosted a community craft night on the back porch of my favorite watering hole. It was a huge hit.

Free supplies included the cardboard tubes, along with sticks, pine needles, and moss from a nature hike. Other items I picked up at a creative reuse center, including remnants of upholstery trims, art yarn scraps, partially used tubes of craft paint, and a couple of costume wigs to cut apart for hair. In towns without a creative reuse center, I have found similar items at thrift and dollar stores. Wrapping sticks with threads, trims, and other bits, then attaching them to finished masks produces a collection of tiki totems you can enjoy in a number of ways. Place a few in a container with greenery to add flair to a tropical cocktail evening, or put a haunted island spin on your next murder mystery dinner party.

Prints

While there are several types of printmaking achievable on the road with minimal equipment, I've found hand-carved stamps to be the easiest. If you don't have a travel set of linocut blades to carve rubber mats or old vinyl erasers into your scene of choice, one of the most accessible solutions is flat styrofoam packaging and your average ballpoint pen. Simply save and sanitize the foam trays from meat and takeout purchases and slice the curved parts away, leaving only the flat portion. Cut to your desired size, and trace a design into the foam, leaving grooves which will form the details of your print. Be advised that younger hands will be more successful with larger pieces of foam and less detail.

The only other supply you need is a moistened ink pad. I have a small one I usually make room for in my luggage, which I store in a leakproof bag. If you'd rather not take that risk, I have seen these in some fairly small village markets. I'm speaking of the type where they stock everything from basic school supplies to kitchen towels and tea kettles. Ink pads are pretty easy to access. If you run into problems, though, you can always experiment with craft paint.

At this point, you're basically ready to press your stamp into the pigment and stamp on your paper of choice. Smaller stamps provide a wider range of options for using repurposed paper items. The brown craft paper that comes wrapped around shipped items, bits of business envelopes from the mail, and even empty sections of printed documents can come into play if archival paper isn't at your disposal. For example, I've found that black ink stamped on brown packing paper with torn edges can look quite striking on a black background. If you're worried about having limited pattern-drawing experience, don't be. I've done pencil-carved foam stamps in remote locations with students as young as seven. Seriously, you'll be surprised at how rewarding the finished product can be.

These pint-sized prints can serve a number of purposes. I've personally used them to add dimension to an art journal entry, as handmade gift tags, and to decorate thank you notes. Giving them as a gift? Try adding a backing, or a coordinating mat and frame to elevate the look. They are also fun to have on hand if you happen to stumble upon one of those free tiny art galleries during your adventures.

Postcards

I've been making homemade postcards and sending them to friends for a few years now. The skill-level barrier for creating them is extremely low, while the freedom to elevate the end product as your artistic talents grow is virtually unlimited. This means that in addition to being quite a bit of fun to do, they are also achievable for travelers of many ages and abilities. The best part? People are legitimately tickled to find these in their mail, no matter how abstract, rustic, or quirky their particular postcard is.

There's a reason ideas and tutorials for mail art and pen-pal clubs have had a resurgence. There's something heartwarming about getting an item in the post that isn't a bill or a sale flyer. It makes people feel seen. And the more real and vulnerable you are with the postcards you make, the more the people who receive them will feel they can really see you too.

While you can certainly spend a small fortune on supplies to start this project, it is absolutely unnecessary. In many parts of the world, it isn't possible to overspend anyway, as supply sources are few and far between. Some of the most basic cards can be created with empty food boxes from the pantry, tourism brochures, and a few readily available basics such as scissors, a glue stick, and some crayons. You'll also need something to glue on the imaged side of the card you cut from the food box so you can decorate it. Blank index cards are usually my first choice, but do what works for you. From there, just color in a background, cut an interesting image from one of your brochures to collage on top of it, and add your address and message to the plain background of the completed postcard. Easy peasy.

Bottom line? There are a number of ways to be creative while traveling, many of which don't require lugging along a ton of tools and equipment in your pack. With a little ingenuity and a bit of leftover packaging, you can create more art than you might expect.

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